

AUG 28 1978

UNIVERSAL Press Clipping Bureau

People First convention in Capital City success for more than 200 handicapped

By United Press International

Ollie Rector clutched a tissue, and her hands quivered as she stood at the podium. She looked out at the group of 200 persons and stammered as she began to speak. But her audience didn't seem to notice.

They were eager to hear the words of this woman, who, like many of them, had spent part of her life in an institution for the mentally or physically handicapped.

"I hope they can stop calling us handicapped," she said. "They think they're better than us ... but people have handicaps in their head somewhere," she said. As her voice choked up, she stopped abruptly and sat down to loud applause.

Mrs. Rector is chairman of a two-day convention, called People First, held Saturday and Sunday in Lincoln for Nebraska's mentally and physically handicapped citizens. It is the first convention of its type in the state, she said, and was organized and run by the handicapped.

Mrs. Rector, who spent seven years in Beatrice State Developmental Center, says the object of the statewide convention was to unite the handicapped and make them aware of their rights and potential.

"We want to be a part of other people, not pushed in a corner somewhere," she said.

The idea for the statewide convention came from an Omaha self-help handicapped group called Project II. Ray Loomis, who was in the Beatrice institution 15 years, started Project II about 2½ years ago. He invited 30 persons, mostly friends from Beatrice, to his first meeting. Three came.

Now the monthly meetings usually attract more than 40 persons, and more than 150 handicapped persons belong to the organization.

Loomis, 41, stammers slightly as he talks about the group. He started it, he said, because he wanted the handicapped to "have equal rights for themselves and show they can make it by themselves." He doesn't think institutions teach the handicapped to rely on themselves.

Mrs. Rector and Loomis are bitter about their days at Beatrice. Social life

was severely restricted, they said. Men and women were allowed to talk to each other only during dance sessions, and even then they had to dance two feet apart.

Loomis escaped five times, and each time he was returned, he said, his head was shaved and he had to polish floors in his bare feet with an iron broom for 16 hours at a time.

When Loomis isn't working as a dishwasher at Coco's in Omaha, he spends his time organizing activities for the group, including meetings, picnics and dances. He and his wife, Nancy, have an 18-month old son, Billy.

Project II is supported solely by members' contributions. The treasury now has \$270.

Loomis said he spent a year planning the convention, which was modeled after a People First convention involving more than 700 handicapped people in Oregon.

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