

Founder of GOARC's Project II Honored

Loomis is Finalist for National Award

United Way of the Midlands:
June 1979



"If you think you are handicapped, you might as well stay indoors; if you think you are a person come on out and tell the world."—Ray Loomis, Founder of Project II.

NATIONAL FINALIST - Project II founder, Ray Loomis, enjoys evenings at home with wife, Nancy, also active in Project II, and two year-old son, Billy.

In the mid-seventies, Ray Loomis, a young man who'd spent more than 15 years in state institutions for the mentally retarded, began a new life as a contributing, tax-paying member of society. When Loomis arrived in Omaha he was helped by the Greater Omaha Association for Retarded Citizens (GOARC), a United Way agency.

But Loomis was not satisfied with making it on his own; he wanted to volunteer his time to GOARC to help people like himself — out of an institution and finding it hard to learn the ropes of living in the "normal" world. Thus, Project II was born, a group dedicated to self-advocacy for the handicapped.

The staff at GOARC encouraged Loomis' and said GOARC would sponsor Project II and give the group space for meetings.

"If you think you are handicapped, you might as well stay indoors; if you think you are a person, come on out and tell the world," Loomis said. This became the group's philosophy.

"Project II started out in 1975 as a social group of three and went on to become a self-advocacy

group of over 200 members," said Bonnie Shultz, administrative assistant to the director of ENCOR (Eastern Nebraska Community Office for Retardation).

In recognition of Loomis' efforts to promote the full rights and citizenship of the handicapped, KETV honored him as Omaha's winner of the Jefferson Award, given through the American Institute for Public Service, Washington, D.C. Out of 180 nominees, Loomis was the judges' unanimous choice for the award for outstanding public service in the community, said Betty Shapiro, KETV Community Affairs Manager. A half-hour documentary on Loomis was aired on KETV in April. Loomis has been notified that he is one of 16 finalists for the national Jefferson Award. If he wins, he will be presented with a gold and silver medal and \$1,000 in prize money on June 26 in the Supreme Court of United States, Washington, D.C.

Shapiro said she believes that Loomis was chosen because of the direction of his volunteer work. "There was personal struggle in-

volved which included Ray's growth and his adjustment to the community after institutionalization. He was still not satisfied. He saw that other people making this transition needed support."

Bonnie Shultz explained that the important aspect of the movement was gaining the rights of the handicapped, "People speaking for themselves for what they wanted instead of through a mediator."

Project II has mushroomed. Last summer Loomis successfully organized the first "People First" statewide convention attended by 170 people. All the speakers were handicapped, but as their motto indicates, they were people first. Their handicap was second.

Loomis said he is planning trips to Blair, Valentine and Norfolk to help set up similar groups. The goal of the local chapter is to have a Project II in every city and town.

Shultz said, "Ray is a born problem solver who can show others good ways to get things done. In lots of ways, he can do this much better than professionals. He's been there."