

Agency, church, family representatives confer on disabled

By Teresa A. Parsons

People from worlds that have often collided in the past gathered last week to share experiences and expertise on developmental disabilities.

Agency people mingled with members of religious and community support groups from five states at "Merging Two Worlds," a conference presented Saturday and Sunday, September 29 and 30, at Rochester's Jewish Community Center.

What brought the groups together was the growing conviction that they share a common mission — that of integrating developmentally disabled people as fully as possible into the everyday life of congregations and neighborhoods.

At one time, those who worked in the social-service system were convinced they didn't need community involvement, according to Robert Perske, one of the conference's keynote speakers. Because they believed that contact with an insensitive and uninformed outside world would only prove painful to developmentally disabled people, social service professionals used what funds they had to create safe, institutional environments.

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Eventually, the professionals realized that some disabled persons might be better off in the community. But they still believed that their structured system of care was the best way to serve them.

A writer who advocates building bridges between the disabled and the rest of society, Perske said that the "professional-knows-best" attitude not only alienated religious groups and families, but also belittled their efforts and experiences.

Nevertheless, informal networks of families and volunteer support groups grew. Their wisdom and intuition often contradicted the standards developed by the service professionals. Battles erupted between the groups over how resources should be allocated and how standards should be determined at a variety of levels, from courts to schools.

Few on either side realized how much they needed one another. "They system was like having all the pieces of a Maserati car lying around in a garage. If you could ever put them together, you could really roll," Perske said.

One factor that has brought professionals and parents closer together is the trimming of social-service budgets. "It used to be that just about every grant you wrote was funded," he said. "Now that the flow of money from above has begun to cease, have you noticed how quickly the professionals have recognized parent-to-parent networks, clergy and religious?"

"This conference is very timely, because now that the money has dried up, you have a chance to create something these people will understand," he added.

More than a year ago, a coalition of religious

and agency representatives headed by the Monroe Developmental Center's Religious Services Advisory Board began to plan the "Merging Two Worlds" conference.

Organizers say the gathering is only part of a larger attempt to discover and celebrate what agencies and churches are already doing to integrate developmentally disabled people into congregations and communities, and to help both kinds of organizations develop new programs.

"We are just beginning to ask how we can hear accurately the voice of persons with disabilities in our congregations," said the Rev. William Gaventa, coordinator of religious services at Monroe Developmental Center.

Nearly 20 workshops covered areas from accessibility to religious education to the effect of worship styles on people with disabilities.

Also featured as keynote speakers were: the Rev. Robert J. Standhardt, director of public affairs for the Goodwill Industries Rehabilitation Center in Sioux City, Iowa; Ann P. Turnbull, a professor and acting associate director of the Bureau of Child Research at the University of Kansas; and Parker J. Palmer, a writer, teacher and spiritual director on staff at the St. Benedict Center in Madison, Wis.

"Why do persons like me find it so hard to extend my heart and home to persons with disabilities?" Palmer asked during his presentation, titled "Welcoming the Stranger."

The answer, he said, is that although hospitality to strangers is a value shared by all religious and humanist traditions, people nevertheless fear the unknown.

People fear strangers because they challenge illusions — that we truly know ourselves or others, that we can alter reality, that we can earn love, he explained.

"An encounter with a stranger who is disabled is a chance to see our invisible disabilities," he said. "They uncover the shaky foundations of my life to reveal my spiritual poverty. I may not want to deal with that, but they do me a great service. It just doesn't feel like it at the time.

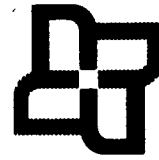
"Getting rid of our illusions, moving closer to truth is the continual task of our lives," he added.

People with developmental disabilities are not always the strangers, Palmer pointed out. "We are all strangers to someone . . . If the world is not a safe place for the stranger, then it's not a safe place for me," he said.

Videotapes of the keynote speakers, consultation and written materials on the topics covered are available to those who were unable to attend the conference. Call the Rev. Gaventa at (716) 461-2800.

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For over 125 years, Niagara University has been committed to the education of the total individual. The University has been accomplishing this mission by maintaining quality academic programs (over 700 different courses), a low student faculty ratio (17-1), a medium size coeducational population (2,300 undergraduates), and a wide range of academic, athletic, social and cultural activities (over 70 clubs and organizations). These factors coupled with a strong financial aid program (servicing 90 percent of NU's population) make NU a place where bright futures begin.

SCHEDULE OF EVENTS

12:30 - 1:00	Registration
1:00 - 2:00	Welcome Admissions and Financial Aid Presentation
2:15 - 3:00	Academic Session

TOURS OF CAMPUS WILL BE GIVEN SUNDAY AFTERNOON BEGINNING AT 3:00 P.M.

PROGRAMS OF STUDY

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PRE-REGISTRATION INFORMATION

Pre-registration is strongly recommended, although not required. If time permits, please contact the Admissions Office and indicate your choice of academic sessions. These sessions include: Arts and Sciences, Business Administration, Nursing, Education, Transportation, Travel and Tourism.

For additional information contact:
The Office of Admissions
Niagara University
Niagara University, New York 14109
(716) 285-1212 or toll free
in NYS 1-800-462-2111

Steuben County

Continued from Page 4

She has lived right next to the church since she moved to Cohocton from Mississippi 40 years ago. "The church is almost my home, really," she said. "I've worked with just about everything we've had going."

She's on parish council and the Thanks Giving Appeal committee and for years, she and several other parish women have prepared supper for families that gather at St. Pius for funerals.

"There's no funeral parlor in the town. Most people don't have a house big enough for that," Dispenza explained. "So we give 'em a good meal and that way they can sit and talk."

"You see, we share happiness and we share sadness, because that's life, isn't it?" she added.

Free milk program for students

A free special milk policy for Catholic elementary school children unable to pay the full price has been announced by the Office of General Education. Eligibility will be determined by family size and income. The following schools are participating in the Free Milk Program: All Saints Academy, Corning; Blessed Sacrament Junior High, Rochester; Guardian Angels, Rochester; Our Lady of Lourdes/Seron Junior High, Rochester; St. Ann, Hornell; St. Francis DeSales/St. Stephen, Geneva; St. Joseph, Wayland, St. Mary, Bath; St. Michael, Penn Yan; St. Patrick, Owego; St. Stanislaus, Rochester; and St. Thomas More, Rochester.

Families falling within the income scale are urged to apply by completing application forms sent home in a letter to parents. Individual applications may be submitted any time during the school year.

Each school will designate an official to review applications and determine eligibility. Any dissatisfaction with a ruling by an official may be appealed through a hearing.

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