

FEATURE

Jesuit taps acting ability in people with disabilities

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

People with disabilities should create employment opportunities, not simply wait for them to appear.

That's the opinion of Brother Rick Curry, SJ, who speaks from experience: The Jesuit brother has become internationally recognized in the world of theater, despite being born with one partial arm.

Brother Curry said there's a certain amount of bias against people with disabilities in the work force. But he emphasized that the bias isn't universal — and neither should it be an excuse not to pursue employment.

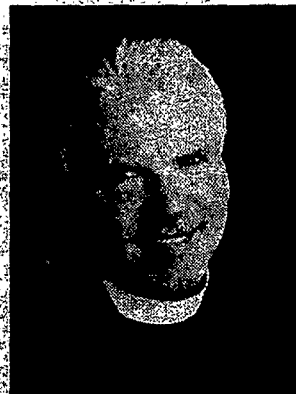
"I don't think there's a hard and fast attitude (from employers). It's more the person with the disability who has to navigate through the stormy waters," Brother Curry, 57,

said in a telephone interview from Maine. "To say, 'Oh, society is against me' — that really doesn't work very well, because then you're defeated."

Brother Curry said he encourages people to embrace their disabilities, rather than lament them.

"Celebrate what you have! We can only praise the creator with the face he gave us," Brother Curry said. "Go with that, and go with a certain amount of enthusiasm and courage. It's a great conversion to say (a disability is) not a minus."

Brother Curry will talk more about disabilities and their impact on employment when he visits Monroe County Thursday, Sept. 28, for a 5:30 p.m. lecture at The Harley School, 1981 Clover St., in Brighton. The event is sponsored by the



Brother Rick Curry, SJ

Al Sigi Center, a coalition of upstate New York agencies that serve nearly 50,000 people with disabilities.

In 1977, Brother Curry founded the National Theatre Workshop for the Handicapped. He was motivated to launch the project after being rejected for a television commercial due to his missing right forearm.

Brother Curry continues on as artistic director for the workshop, which trains disabled people who are interested in the arts. He maintains a studio in Manhattan, and in 1997 opened a residential school in Belfast, Maine, to provide easier access for the disabled than is possible in the crowded streets of New York City.

The Jesuit said his workshop is open to people with "every physical disability there is." In Maine, Brother Curry's five most recent two-week sessions accommodat-

ed more than 160 people from 24 states and five countries.

"We have a theater school, fine arts program, bakery and a gallery," he noted. "We're actually starting a new school in January, training people to be bakers."

Brother Curry said his mission does not stop at training students. He also campaigns for the entertainment industry to utilize disabled people more often. "What we're trying to do is flood the market with highly trained, qualified actors," he said.

Alumni of his workshops have appeared in the movie "Awakenings"; television soap operas; and such former prime-time shows as "Cagney and Lacey" and "The Cosby Show."

Yet Brother Curry expressed frustration at Hollywood's tendency to use ac-



Photo courtesy of National Theatre Workshop for the Handicapped
Students from one of Brother Curry's workshops in Belfast, Maine, rehearse for a performance last June.

tors without disabilities to portray characters with disabilities, such as Dustin Hoffman in *Rain Man* and Daniel Day-Lewis in *My Left Foot*.

"Hollywood feels it has to cast an able-bodied star," Brother Curry remarked. He compared this practice with Al Jolson wearing blackface: "It would be interesting to see if any white person got away with playing a black role today. I think (people with disabilities) are right where black people were about 50 years ago."

Brother Curry holds a doctorate in theatre history from New York University, and formerly taught theater at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia. He was the subject of a *People* magazine feature in October 1999 and has appeared on such national talk shows as "60 Minutes" and

"Good Morning America." He entered the Society of Jesus in 1961, and said his order has been "enormously supportive" of his work over the years.

"The life of the human spirit has been something the Jesuits have always been fostering, as well as their commitment to the marginalized," Brother Curry said.

He noted that his theater work pays homage to the Jesuits' founder, St. Ignatius of Loyola. "St. Ignatius stressed the perfection of eloquence. He wanted students to defend their faith with great articulation," Brother Curry said.

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EDITORS' NOTE: Admission to Brother Curry's Sept. 28 lecture is free, but seating is limited and pre-registration is required. Call 442-4100, ext. 8944, to register.

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