

WYD emphasized needs, talents of disabled

By Karen M. Franz
General Manager/Editor

One of the challenges of organizing an event of World Youth Day's magnitude was catering to the needs of more than 200,000 pilgrims representing a wide range of nations and cultures. Simultaneous translation of WYD's five main events, for example, was broadcast on FM radio bands in eight different languages. Signage for the event also was provided in several tongues, and numerous events focused on the unique aspects of Catholic life in various regions of the world.

A smaller yet no-less-varied group of participants likewise challenged the WYD staff to provide an entirely different range of services — from sign-language interpretation in two languages to wheelchair transport and reserved seating at the papal Mass — and to incorporate their perspectives directly into the WYD program.

The WYD office had registered approximately 750 "special-needs" pilgrims — visually impaired, developmentally disabled, mobility impaired and deaf people — as of Friday, July 26, according to Jan Godfrey, WYD's special-needs coordinator.

The Farmington-based Wheels in Motion dance troupe and Celebration of Youth musical group were among the many performers who participated in the event's Youth Festival component, casting the WYD spotlight — and the cameras of 800 media outlets — on the talents of disabled people.

Other highlights for the disabled were the outdoor Way of the Cross presentation, in which 16-year-old Michael Nogoda portrayed Simon of Cyrene, briefly helping Jesus to carry the cross by resting its end on the basket of his wheelchair; sign-language interpretation in both American Sign Language (ASL) and Langue des Signes Québécois (LSQ) on "jumbotron" television screens at all major events; and musical performances by singer Renée Bondi, a quadriplegic, and Tony Melendez, who gained world attention by playing guitar with his feet for Pope John Paul II during the pope's 1987 visit to Los Angeles.

Another key component was extensive participation by Canadian Jean Vanier, founder of L'Arche, an international federation of faith-based communities for people with developmental disabilities. Vanier was a speaker at English- and French-language catechesis sessions, presentations related to WYD service projects and press briefings.

Although Godfrey said a lack of records made it impossible to compare special-needs participation this year with that of previous World Youth Days, she said the Toronto gathering definitely placed greater emphasis on the needs and talents of disabled people than did its precursors. In fact, the involvement of the L'Arche community was a product of a lesser emphasis on the disabled at WYD 2000 in Rome. When members of L'Arche communities attended the papal Mass that year, Godfrey said, they found that volunteers had taken over the area reserved for them, leaving no room for the disabled. As a result, Vanier asked the organizers of WYD 2002 to include L'Arche representatives in their planning, she said.

"Our philosophy was to try to integrate the disabled as much as possible," Godfrey said, noting that her special-needs planning committee included representatives from L'Arche and each of the community's other constituent groups (deaf, physically disabled and visually impaired).

During the opening Mass on Tuesday, July 23, special-needs pilgrims were seated with the general population. This was not possible for the papal Mass that concluded WYD, Godfrey said, because the terrain at Downsview Park was rough and deeply rutted. As a result, a secured area to the left of the stage was reserved for the special-needs community, and some disabled delegates were able to sit in high-rise bleachers near



Karin von Volgtlander/Staff photographer
Paul and Cécile Charlebois of Canada watch a sign-language interpreter on the jumbotron in the special-needs area of Toronto's Downsview Park during the July 27 evening vigil.

the stage.

Although segregation was a necessary evil at Downsview, "it was just for people who couldn't manage with their groups" in the general pilgrim population, she said, noting that WYD also set up a rest tent for the disabled, complete with 300 cots.

"Father Tom (Rosica) and all the operations directors have supported us," she said. "I can't say enough about the operations people. ... The directors were really conscious of integration."

Godfrey, a program consultant with the Government of Ontario, has been on special assignment with World Youth Day since December 1, 2001. Although she has relied on a wheelchair since a car accident in the 1960s, this was Godfrey's first experience working with the special-needs community. When she became aware of the opening, she was looking for a new assignment that would conclude around the time of an early-retirement package that was to take effect July 31.

"I thought it would be a great challenge and a good opportunity to give something back to people with special needs," she said.

Godfrey, who described herself as a non-practicing Anglican (Episcopalian), said her assignment with WYD had been a fabulous experience for her. "I've learned a lot about the special-needs individuals and just being here among them is really rewarding," she said.

Nevertheless, the position has posed some challenges. "Since I had not spent a lot of time with the special-needs community, it was a challenge to surround myself with a working group" that was attuned to the needs of this community.

One member of that working group was Carol Stokes, a volunteer pastoral worker

uling of events.

A total of 12 sign-language interpreters provided ASL and LSQ translation, working from the audio translations being broadcast throughout the area. WYD 2002 attracted 156 deaf delegates from Canada, France, Spain, Lebanon, Germany, the Netherlands, Australia and Chile. Those who did not understand LSQ or ASL — including British delegates who use a different English-based sign language — were asked to bring their own interpreters because it would not be possible to provide sign interpretation in so many languages.

Stokes noted that WYD's liturgical committee also asked her to train 260 "animators" — a word coined not by the deaf community, but by liturgical committee members — who gestured and/or signed certain refrains from songs at the papal Mass. She said this was a very positive development and noted that the WYD organizers had given the deaf community a lot of support. "This WYD has been the most accessible of all WYDs," she said.

That view was shared by Father Mahéas Christian, a master of theology student at the University of Toronto and priest of the Archdiocese of Paris, France. Father Christian, who had worked with Vanier in France and currently is working with the L'Arche Daybreak community in Richmond Hills, Ontario, said the special-needs community's situation at WYD 2002 was quite good. "We are far from the stage," he said. "But in Rome, it was a nightmare. We were far from plenty of things, and the organization there was not so good."

Mary Bastedo of Toronto, who also works with the L'Arche Daybreak community, said one key difference between this gathering and previous World Youth Days was the way in which Vanier's catechesis sessions were scheduled. In Rome, she said, L'Arche conducted catechesis for disabled people only, but in Toronto Vanier gave a general catechesis that drew 8,000 people to the Coliseum at Exhibition Place. "It's much better integrated" with the general population, she said.

She said a pantomime performance at the opening Mass included a disabled person and a blind person from the Spirit Movers, a dance troupe made up of L'Arche members. "The moral (of the pantomime) was that you can't get to the top of the mountain without including everyone," she said.

Father Christian noted that the Holy Father also had been very affirming of L'Arche's Beatitudes-based spirituality. Bastedo pointed out that during a boat ride around Lake Simcoe (in which his Strawberry Island retreat was located), the Holy Father specifically asked to go into the bay where the Huronia Regional Center is located. The center is an institution for people with disabilities, and some residents who were in boats paddled out to the pope's boat to greet him, she said.

Bastedo and Father Christian had come to WYD with about 160 disabled pilgrims from L'Arche Canada, which comprises the Daybreak residential community and the Faith and Light non-residential extended community.

Father Christian said he hopes that at the next World Youth Day the special-needs community will "have an opportunity to share our spirituality, which is based on the Beatitudes, and nourish our everyday life. We have something to share and something to receive."

Similarly, Godfrey said she hopes the successful prominence of special-needs individuals in this World Youth Day shows that "people with special needs should be integrated into every aspect of planning every event — from planning to participating to enjoying."

Progress made by the special-needs community at WYD 2002 was quite encouraging, Bastedo said. "I hope people will take the message and incarnate it — really enter into relationships with people with disabilities," she concluded.

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