

CATHERINE'S STORY

As presented by

Marsha Forest

Catherine's story could be the story of every student currently labelled "mentally handicapped". If we stopped seeing the mental handicap and started seeing the person, we could achieve for all what has been achieved by Catherine.

In 1984, Catherine attended Thornhaven School for the Mentally Retarded, and Catherine acted and looked like a 12 year old "retarded" person. Who could blame her? Her program was a perversion of the use of functional curriculum i.e. bed making in the middle of the day, washing dishes in a sink at the level of her knees and cleaning already clean mirrors. There was the usual toothbrushing, hair grooming and trips to the local shopping centre. Other typical students came to "help the TR's" and do music with them.

Catherine's family went through a lengthy, exhausting and emotionally draining battle with the local public school board to appeal Catherine's placement at Thornhaven. Their request that Catherine attend the local neighborhood high school in Sept 1985 was denied. The appeal was lost.

The family also filed a human rights complaint against the school board. During this part of the struggle the family went to the local catholic school board (one parent is Catholic) and asked if they would admit Catherine to their high school that fall. The answer...yes.

This presentation will show the changes in Catherine as she became part of a typical high school community. Slides will illustrate her daily program and the physical changes in Catherine as she becomes a "teenager" with her new school uniform, her trendy red new wave glasses and best of all her new "gang" of friends.

The talk will describe how the process developed with the help of a young woman hired to be an INTEGRATION FACILITATOR. The job of the I.F. was to reach out and help form a friendship circle around Catherine and then develop a PERSONAL PLAN OF ACTION for Catherine.

This PERSONAL PLAN OF ACTION (PPA) was developed through a team effort involving the family, Catherine's friends and school personnel. The key questions were: "WHO IS CATHERINE? WHAT ARE HER STRENGTHS? and, WHAT ARE HER NEEDS?" A process and a plan developed out of these three questions.

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education as "the lowest 1% of the retarded population", is now FULLY educated and integrated in a regular ninth grade program which involves going to typing class, computer science, gym, art, home economics, and of course "hanging out" and cafeteria.

Catherine's story proves that quality integration CAN take place when a committed team of professionals, parents and advocates come together to plan creatively and personally around any individual. Catherine is lucky. There are still twenty inmates stuck in Thornhaven Public School and 12 of Catherine's peers still spend most of their day in a self contained "Functional Life Skills Class". Catherine spends her day with real people in a real place. The central theme of this presentation is that there is only one place to learn life - not in simulated, but in stimulating and challenging environments.

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