

Educator fought for inclusion of mentally handicapped

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The Globe and Mail
Friday, June 9, 2000

Toronto -- It might have been a scene from Alabama in 1963 -- two families taking their children to school, daring school officials to turn them away.

But it was 1989 and the schools were in Ontario. The children were not black, but were mentally handicapped. And in this instance the schools turned away the children while reporters scribbled notes and photographers snapped pictures.

The attempt to evoke the image from the United States Deep South was deliberate, and was the brainchild of Marsha Forest, a former assistant professor of education at York University who was dedicated to the inclusion of the mentally handicapped with the rest of society. Special education programs were, in her view, "an apartheid system of education."

Dr. Forest died last week after suffering from cancer for 12 years. She was 52. *Dream Catchers and Dolphins*, an account of her struggle with the disease, was compiled and written by Dr. Forest and her husband Jack Pearpoint.

Together, they founded the Centre for Integrated Education and Inclusion Press International. Both foster the idea of an inclusive education and community.

"She had a vision about people that was contagious," said Keith Powell, executive director of the Ontario Association for Community Living. "Inclusion was an absolute given."

Mr. Powell said Dr. Forest was instrumental in getting the Ontario government to provide funds to support home care for the mentally handicapped. The association presented her with its lifetime achievement award about two weeks ago.

As director of education at Toronto's Frontier College, Dr. Forest also established a course called *Vive la Difference*, which exposed medical students to people who were handicapped or had chosen a lifestyle far from the middle-class norm. On at least one occasion, the lecturer was a former biker who, in his own words, had "been arrested and charged with every crime in the book."

"If you're going to be a good family doctor, you're not just going to meet nice white well-educated people," she said by way of explanation.

Frontier College, Canada's oldest adult-education institution, also taught illiterate adults to read.

Dr. Forest took a particular interest in one student, another convicted criminal, who was once labeled "learning disabled." He was finally taught to read while he was sitting at her kitchen table.

"I asked for the toughest student Frontier could give me and they gave me Tracy," she said. "I believe

trainers always have to have a student to keep fresh so they don't abstract."

In the same interview with a Globe and Mail reporter, Dr. Forest revealed part of her philosophy on education.

"Teachers get what they expect," she said. "Unless you believe in students, they won't learn. These kids, they're put in 'opportunity' classes, they sit at the back of the room." The process turns into a cruel charade from which "dumb kids" or "stupid troublemakers" emerge as walking time bombs turning into angry criminals or passive victims, she said.

She was director of education at Frontier from 1987 to 1990. At the same time, she was a visiting scholar at the G. Allan Rocher Institute, formerly the National Institute on Mental Retardation.

Marsha Forest was born in New York City on Aug. 10, 1942. While she was an undergraduate at Queen's College, City University of New York, she discovered poverty and started teaching under the Brooklyn Bridge. Her students were black children who had been abandoned by the education system.

She got her bachelor's degree from Queen's College in 1963 and her master's degree from Columbia University in 1964. From there she went to the University of Massachusetts, where she earned her doctorate in education.

She taught at the Lexington School for the Deaf in New York while she was still in university, and came to Canada in 1968 as a special consultant at the Montreal Oral School for the Deaf. From there she went to McGill University as an assistant professor in the department of continuing education.

She and her husband founded the Centre for Integrated Education in 1990.