

Scottish Rights Group
working together against disempowerment

CONFERENCE REPORT

*Discrimination:
Time To Fight Back.*

3 June 1992
Hospitality Inn
Glasgow.

2.3 Jack Pearpoint and Marsha Forrest Centre for Integrated Education & Community.

Marsha Forrest

There is nothing new that we can tell you. All that we can say is that we stand in solidarity with you, and we need you to come to us and say the same thing
This issue is international. Nothing is much better in Canada - and it's certainly not better in the United States. People all over the world are struggling with the same issues. The beauty of a day like this is that you are building coalitions.

I come at this personally from a number of angles. We went to look at nursing homes when my mother needed looking after - I just wept at the thought of anyone's mother or father going into places like that. If you have money in the United States there are palaces for older people - though I still don't think that is the answer. That experience taught us a lot when it came to helping Jack's mother. I also come at it from working with parents of children labelled disabled, and realising you have to build a coalition with people who are over the age of.....

These children are fighting to get into schools that don't discriminate, so we don't get another generation of people that don't know each other. We've also been working with people who've been marginalised - people coming out of prison, homeless people. we've had to form alliances with social workers, educators, all of whom are not the enemy. It's not parents against professionals, it's some parents and some professionals against the others.

All we've learned is that different groups of people have to join up and work together. In North America the different groups are finally getting together so that it's not the disability groups over here, the womens' groups here, the elderly over here and so on. The other exciting coalition that we are involved in trying to build is with the African and Hispanic groups in the United States and with the native community. It's groups of people sitting down together in rather heated meetings with different agendas.

We have created something called PATH to help with this. This came out of spending a lot of time sitting down and reading all the management ideas from the big companies. We thought let's take the ideas they use to make hamburgers, and use them to help people. One of the most frustrating things is well-intentioned people running around in the voluntary sector not knowing what they are doing.

Be careful about asking for what you want - you might just get it.

When I was a young teacher I walked up to a leader of the African-American community, and I said "I want to be a teacher in the ghetto, and make the schools better". He looked at me without bashing me over the head and he said "Burn the ghetto". I thought 'should we build swimming-pools in the concentration camps, or should we bomb the concentration camps?'

I was young and I meant well, but I needed someone to walk me along a different path. You don't want to make the ghetto better, or make special education better, you want to get rid of it. Special education is a form of apartheid, a legalised way of teaching people that there are some people better than other people.

I'm extremely optimistic because I don't have time to be too pessimistic.

The trend in North America is to move to one education system - special education is fighting it.

We believe that we're all better together. None of us can do this alone.

We want to try different ways of getting the message across. We know it's hard; but sometimes we need to lighten up. If we can't get together with some spirit then the system has won - we are dead.

We watched a rock video called 'Labelling Blues' made by Patrick Worth and some young people in Toronto. Patrick Worth is now President of People First in Canada - he literally jumped out of a window to escape the institution.

People gave their reactions to the video - 'it was great seeing young people and disabled people getting together and enjoying themselves'

'People are entitled not to be discriminated against, whatever their label is. That film really showed that people want to be united and not be divided into their separate groups and put aside in their own wee corner when they shouldn't be'

Jack Pearpoint

I'm going to walk you through these posters. We've all been saying the same things this morning and you're not going to hear anything else. Marsha's been saying it, Nora said it, and I think it's delightful you have an MP who understands at a very gut level what you're talking about. That may not win many points with Mr. Major, but it's a tremendous asset. Everything I'm going to talk about is very simple - you try and do this alone and you're dead. We've got to do it together. If only pensioners try and organise for pensioners, they can be cut off and sidelined - people know how to do that. But if we organise together and support each other they can't do that in the same way.

The people who made the video could get no money from anyone - no-one would like to see a video like that. They made it anyway and they went to the channel that shows rock videos and they said no-one would like to see that, it's depressing and we don't like to show that kind of violence on our network.. and you begin to understand how sick some people are... there's more violence per split second in the average rock video than most of us could dream of...

What this is all about is whether we are going to focus on all the talents we have to offer - people who have 70 years of learning or 80 years of learning or 90 years of learning - are we going to focus on what we have to offer each other, or are we just going to garbage everybody. It's a choice. And quite clearly some people have a vested interest in isolating some people so they are excluded. We made that mistake. It was the kind of mistake that Marsha talked about, where we asked for something and it wasn't what we wanted. You've got to be really careful in thinking about what you want, because if you only think about what you are going to get the chances are good that someone's going to be smart enough to give it to you, and you'll really be in trouble.

So if we are going to do this we have to decide who we are talking about. We're talking about the criteria for being included in a community, in schools, in basic rights, is breathing. Nothing else.

Our friend Ed Roberts has spent most of his life in an iron lung. he pointed out that if we left this poster the way it was, he would be excluded; so we added a respirator. When we're talking about being included, we're not trying to sell you a bill of goods. We're wanting to explore some ideas with you, and when we talk about this whole notion of inclusion in society, it's just about how do we learn to live together.

Some of us have been working on this idea for a while and trying to understand what this means in the 90's. Some of us have been accused - correctly - of cheerleading. We've done that. But one of the things we've noticed while we've been cheerleading is that some people were very frightened about 'what if we let everyone in, wouldn't that break the budget'. The issue is not one of substance, it's an issue of their fear, what you really have to deal with is peoples' fear.

So to begin with people are frightened, and then sometimes they begin to work on it, and if we use a school as an example, they say OK, we'll bring in some children from outside, we'll get them in the room. But there's still this line across the room.

It took us a while to realise that's not what we meant - maybe we weren't careful enough thinking about what we really wanted - this wasn't inclusion, it was just a variation of exclusion.

You've got to be there, you've got to get people in the room, but it goes beyond that. We went back to the dictionary to find out what we were missing. We'd been focusing on the 'in' - but there's another important preposition in there - 'with'. Inclusion is about being with others, not just in. Getting in the door, opening the door is step one, learning to live together is step two.

Mr. Clark noted this morning there's a lot of change going on. In the 90's, change is the only constant we've got, it's non-negotiable. The only negotiating we get to do is how we deal with it. It's helpful to remember sometimes that if it doesn't kill you it will make you stronger. You can survive it you can grow and learn from it. We want to do lots of things, and when you do lots of things you make lots of mistakes. You don't discover anything by getting it right...

The key strategy is DON'T DO IT ALONE. You go to meetings alone, you'll be beat; you face an issue without allies, you'll be beat. We've got to learn to work together, we've got to learn about shared vision, how to be allies, how to disagree.

I want to talk about philosophy - what we believe. Most of us in Western society don't talk about what we believe. We can tell you the chemical composition of all kinds of things but very few of us actually spend time thinking about and struggling with what we believe. I want to introduce you to what the people associated with our centre believe. It's very simple: we believe everybody belongs. Period.

Most people, when you say everybody belongs, it's not what they hear. They say 'well of course everybody belongs, but you don't really mean everybody... not really. Everybody has their own little lists of 'you don't really mean's - but we mean everybody.

Some people don't believe that, so we want to push it a little further. We say hidden underneath that is 'everybody can learn'. And people say 'well of course everybody can learn, but you don't really mean everybody'. We do mean everybody, we mean everybody can learn. A good way for me to think about that because I'm interested in computers is that the finest, fastest, most sophisticated Cray computer yet invented can't duplicate the most basic function of living - breathing. Not even close. We're not in the league yet. The person who's breathing with a respirator has more sophistication than anything we've yet invented.

I think that's adequate to be classified as a human being - and so we're back to rights and justice for everybody, not just for some. This is about you, about me, about all of us. This has **nothing** to do with disability, it has to do with human rights. It has nothing to do with charity, or pity, or being special, it has to do with being human.

I want to talk you through a few ways of thinking about inclusion and exclusion. One image is these two roads with a junction. Lots of us in human services saw that people were being left out. What we decided to do , what we asked for, was to exclude people in order to support them so that they could be part of the mainstream. So we designed all sorts of segregated services to support people, with all these different categories.

What we have done is created an M4, an A9 of exclusion, an incredible superhighway of exclusion. And if they work over here a little like they work in North America, those superhighways are jammed to the hilt with traffic that doesn't get very far very often. They have massive construction zones. They are crowded with those little yellow buses, some full of people, some with just a single person on.

The outcome of the exclusion highway is tragic and deadly. It's waiting. Waiting to die in one of a variety of settings.

When we first drew this we started with one inclusion path. Then someone said to us "I'm a woman, I'm not white, I'm not from your culture, I can't be on your path" We realised there have to be many paths. We realised there have to be some ways back from the exclusion highway, so we drew some in. But these inclusion pathways are not really built yet, not like the exclusion highway. You have to design your own - but be careful what you ask for! We're not interested in fighting with anyone about whether the exclusion highway is the right one - we're a lost cause.

In the exclusion half of the poster, we focused on what needed to be fixed in people. We learned to focus on loneliness and isolation. People who are excluded get better and better at waiting. Prisons and nursing homes are the biggest growth industry in North America. It's such an incredible waste of peoples' talents.

I used to work with kids on the street, and tried to persuade them not to join gangs. It was a waste of time. They wanted meaning and belonging so badly that being killed was a small price to pay. Unless we can change the fundamental system design we are stuck with this side.

On the inclusion side of the poster, we have to figure out what your gift is and how to support it. We have to figure out how to live together in communities which honour diversity. We have to figure out how to provide the kind of nurture that good families can give, for people who don't get that nurturing. Schools are one way to do this - especially if we can get rid of these ridiculous age barriers and open schools up to people of all ages.

It's really good we don't know how to engineer friendships - but we do know things that help. DO THINGS TOGETHER.

The Chinese symbol for crisis contains two elements - danger and opportunity. We tend to emphasise the danger, and overlook the opportunity. By going to the heart of the problem, you can find the solution.