

WASHINGTON - TASH

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PAT WORTH

Keynote Speech

Thank you for the invitation to speak to TASH. It is an honour.

Gunner Dyboid just asked if we institutionalize just people **for** salaries for others. The answer is yes.

Speaking at TASH is a special privilege for me because saved my life.

I was born in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, I had 3 brothers and 5 sisters. I was labelled retarded. My parents didn't understand that we are all different, but that we all have similar needs. We all need to be loved. I didn't have that in my family. They didn't make an effort to understand. My needs were very common: I needed a hug, a friend, access to education. Instead, I went to segregated schools. All I did was figure out crossword puzzles and color books.. I never learned to write. People didn't teach me. They thought I couldn't progress that far.

Let me tell you something about progress. People come along and build sky scrapers - they call that progress. But they also kick people out of their homes to build them. Then they call that progress.

People spend a lot of money on labelling people and on building institutions. The result is that some people have to go through this life, lonely, poor and oppressed. That is not progress. It is unnecessary punishment which often leads to unnecessary death.

I was institutionalized because I had no where to go in the community. I was not treated as part of the family. When relatives came over, I was sent to my room. I was not a child - I was an embarrassment. I still have that hurt inside of me.

One man believed in me - my uncle. He was the janitor at my school. I met him by accident in the school year over lunch. He asked me my name. When I told him, he was stunned. He couldn't understand why my family was doing this to me. He was my uncle. My uncle started to teach me - he taught me the Bible. Later, he got a job elsewhere. He asked me if I wanted to go. I just jumped into his half ton truck and moved with him. I haven't seen my family since. That still hurts. My brothers and sisters are still not part of my family

Then, my uncle had a heart attack, so I had to go back "home" - to a community group home. I needed a place to live. It sounded harmless. It was a residence for 35 people, not a home. I went to work at a sheltered workshop to earn money to live. It was easier to get into the workshop than out. I packaged twist ties on dolls for \$10 per week for 7 years. It was enforced slavery. It is the same as in South Africa. Enforced slavery. There were times I just wanted to go away and die.

I had one friend - Jeff. All we had was each other. That's all. We wouldn't give up on each other. We started to plan escapes just to keep our hopes going. We were seen as a threat. They solved the problem by separating our relationship. They took Jeff away one day in a straight jacket - and I have never seen him since. I was told that people are supposed to support relationships. If you don't have them - you get human destruction. They took Jeff away.

There were beatings - savage and brutal beatings. One day Jeff and I complained about the television, and we watched DALLAS. It is a popular program about greed. The executive director was furious and he got us. He demonstrated his power as further. He gave us Hitler books - we burned them. The next day, thirty-five of us were lined up. We were told that if we stepped forward nothing would happen. Jeff and I stepped forward. We told the truth - and we were hurt. They beat Jeff till he couldn't see from his left eye. My punishment was that I was forced to stand with my thumbs against the wall for three hours and I had to listen to his screams. I still hear it today. The screams don't go away.

The label is a death sentence. It is a life sentence. We should all be treated as equals -

I went to a Gathering last weekend, organized by Frontier College. I want to tell something very special. One woman spoke out in fear that labeled people would be left behind -- because they are self abusive. I said we all have problems. In the institution - I hit myself many times every day. It was destructive - an endless battle.

The biggest problem society has is ignorance. You should be accepted by society - as an individual - as a person - regardless of whether they have a label. Susan cried at that meeting. She cried for her son.

We came knowing and believing we are all equal. But we also know thousands are not treated as equal. I have heard death. I have seen death. I have wanted to die. I couldn't go on

facing punishment after punishment.

We all need love. That 's what keeps the human spirit going. Being labeled retarded denies us the right to live. That is the biggest mistake society can make - the right to be loved.

There are people who are poor - not just in money - but unloved by their neighbors and society. People who live congregated - and where punishment takes the place of love.

Where do you put your values. 8 hours a day and that's it. If we have nothing but paid people in our lives - there will be punishment. Lack of love can kill.

People First has the right to dignity, to have and share love; the right to be a person in society - in a supportive society.

I saw the movie Cry Freedom: In South Africa they kill blacks in the street. But here we deprive people of the human spirit needed to live. Steve Biko educated a white man (Donald Woods) walking through a black neighborhood. They saw people waiting to die, nothing to do, and a child ran across the path. Biko said, if you are a child born to this, you will die in it, but he is loved.

The biggest question we should be asking is not how can we live without you, but how can you live without us.

A few months ago, I traveled to London, England. to the People First Conference. I was treated like a real person. I learned a lot. I was loved. People reassured me that there needs to be love not labels in the society. I heard about the need for employment - including a living wage; most people just wanted a better life - a home they can call their own. A home that doesn't lead to loneliness and destruction. It leads to death.

Self Advocacy has improved, but society is holding back and building walls to keep us out. I think about one of my hero's - Martin Luther King - and his speech: "I had a dream". I remember wanting King to come and rescue me from my oppression. I dreamed of that. He demonstrated the meaning of the words peace and solidarity. He showed what it means to be with people - in solidarity. He just wanted their love. That isn't too much to ask for. I was very sad when he was shot.

It is an honour to be here. But, I don't see too many people here who need support - so I will throw you a challenge. Get the real people here. They have the stories..

I have a final question. Many people wonder how we can live with you. My question is "How can you live without us?"