Handicapped are same as others, just a little slower, says Befus

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“At Michener Centre they always said there were a lot of things I would never learn. They never told me what I could learn though,” said Doreen Befus, an advocate for the mentally handicapped.

Befus, speaking to a group of Grade 12 students in Bentley last Tuesday, told how she had survived 42 years in an institution for the mentally handicapped before gaining her freedom in 1976.

“For years and years everything has been negative. It’s time to bring across to the kids what the handicapped can do. They have to accept those people who are handicapped because they are capable. They’re just like everybody else, just a little slower,” she said.

Along with speaking to the students and fielding any questions they had, she showed the film, “If I can do it, you can do it”, the story of her life while she was institutionalized and after she went out on her own.

Befus and her twin sister were given up for adoption early in life and while her sister was adopted immediately Doreen was moved from one foster home to another. Because she couldn’t keep up with the other kids at school, at the age of seven she was sent to the Provincial Training School or Michener Centre as it is now known.

“Soon I started acting just like those retarded children I was growing up with. I had to learn to accept the fact that I wasn’t normal because it was drilled into me. They told me I could never fit into society, but I have,” she said.

“In the institution they wouldn’t let us do anything for ourselves because we weren’t supposed to be able to do a lot of things. When they bought us clothes they never asked what we wanted or liked, they wouldn’t let us pick out our clothes because they didn’t think we were capable,” she said.

She said when she went out on her own and first started looking for jobs this attitude that she couldn’t do anything stuck in her mind and she thought she really might not be able to make it on her own. But she did, and said others can too.

She was never told outright that she was retarded and only learned of it after she had left the institution.

“They finally let me read my file at the time I was applying to Red Deer College, and when I was the letter that said I was retarded, I thought, “Oh no, the college won’t accept me,” and I cried and cried because I thought I wouldn’t be able to write my story,” said Befus.

It has always been her dream to become a writer and she has had an offer to publish her memoirs if only she can find someone to go over her grammar and write an initial script from her tapes to see if it would be worth publishing.

As well as touring the province giving talks, she constantly writes to all levels of the government asking them to improve conditions for the mentally handicapped and has also been instrumental in bringing better pastoral services to Michener Centre.

With her throughout her tours is Delynne McMurray who recently moved out on his own from Michener Centre. She said there are a lot of things Delynne, who is deaf, can do that they never thought he could.

“There’s nothing wrong with Delynne up there (his mind) they just never gave him a chance. They look at his hearing difficulties instead of his mind. All his gifts today could have been wasted.”

She said he has an innate understanding of electrical devices and plumbing and often picks up old radios and cassette decks and repairs them. She added that deaf people will just give them a chance.

Although she went through many hard times at Michener Centre she said she isn’t bitter towards them.

“I don’t look back on my time in Michener bitterly because I realize that back then there was no place else for them to send people like me,”