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THE MORNING NEWS

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Named after that part of the day which provides the greatest opportunity, The Morning News reports activities of the transition grant project. This publication is made possible by a grant from the Michigan Developmental Disabilities Council, contract # 90415. Life Skills Institute, Jenison Public Schools, Jenison, MI 49428.

JANUARY-FEBRUARY 1990



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Plus much more...

To Students: Please Write Us!

We learned that Ms. Merriam at Broome High School, South Carolina, reads parts of The Morning News to her students. We are excited that students are reading our newsletter! Joel, a student in our program, wrote the following letter to Ms. Merriam's class:

Dear Ms. Merriam's Class,

My name is Joel. Do you like The Morning News newspaper?

I work at Meijers. I work in the Pet and Garden Department. I take Drama and Retailing at Jenison High School. My favorite class is Drama.

Please write back to my class. My teachers' names are Mr. Baas, Mrs. Gray, Mrs. Clark, and Mrs. Terpstra.

Please write soon,

Joe/.



We have several ideas! First, we would like to invite students in Ms. Merriam's class to write to Mr. Baas' class.

We also would like ANY student to write us at The Morning News. We would like to hear about where you work, what you like to do, what you'd like to do someday! Or, maybe you have a poem or short story. We would like to print some letters in The Morning News for others to read. We cannot promise to print all we receive. We do promise to quickly respond to each letter we do receive!

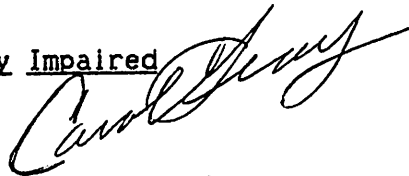
Send letters to: Melissa Andrews and Carol Gray, Jenison High School, 2140 Bauer Rd., Jenison, Michigan 49428. (Mrs. Merriam's class please write in care of Mr. Bass. Let us know if we can print your letters in The Morning News.)

ABOUT OUR COVER PHOTO: Mike and a new set of friends in second semester Aerobics. Aerobics is open for enrollment to both males and females. As chance would have it, Mike was the only male to enroll this semester. Oh well... he decided to stick it out, anyway. See the related story about his placement in Aerobics last fall, "Then and Now" by Melissa Andrews, page 4.

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Self Advocacy and the Severely Impaired

by Carol Gray



Mention self advocacy and the severely impaired in the same breath, and initially it seems like a contradiction in terms. When we consider the severely impaired, especially those with minimal communication skills, it seems unrealistic to talk about self advocacy. If they cannot express themselves, how can they advocate for themselves? Still, we may deny the severely impaired opportunities for self advocacy in our rush to assume, think, and act, on their behalf.

Part of a saying, "What you do speaks so loudly..." seems to have application here. If that's true, the severely impaired ARE "speaking", and quite loudly. If we carefully observe with an attitude that assumes communication, might we also increase the quality, and amount, of communication with the severely impaired? .

Consider this example from Mike's training at Worden Seating. Mike had difficulty identifying areas that needed sweeping. Instead of sweeping up an area with many fabric scraps into a pile, Mike would sweep up small individual pieces one at a time as he passed them. Instead of using verbal prompts from a coach, we made large vinyl arrows and placed them on the floor, pointing to large areas of scraps. Then, Mike was trained to look for the arrows. These would indicate where to begin, and also reminded him to sweep scraps into a pile instead of individually.

The arrows worked well for Mike, and increased his independence from his coach. So the arrows could be used again, Mike was taught to place the arrows in a special box on his cart after sweeping each pile.

One day Mike swept up the first pile as usual, but instead of placing the arrow in the box, he threw the arrow away with the

collected scraps. He continued throwing all the arrows away, and laughed quietly, glancing at his coach with each arrow he tossed.

Communication with the severely impaired is, to a large extent, subject to our assumptions and interpretations of their intent. We observe a behavior, and more likely than not, we attribute it to something...literally, we constantly put words in their mouth. What is frightening is how quickly and confidently we do it.

This situation was no exception. There were many possible explanations why Mike might be throwing the arrows away. Had he forgotten that part of the task, and needed to be retrained? Or was he teasing us...wanting to see what we would do as the arrows we made were thrown away, one after the other? Maybe, suggested his coach, Melissa, he was telling us he could do the task without arrows... that he could identify unswept areas on his own.

We gathered the arrows, and Mike continued without them. Mike in his own way had indicated to us he was ready to work without arrows. Mike's communication was effective because it was to the point, and observed by a sensitive coach. Melissa was right.

Imagine the frustration of the severely impaired when we are wrong. Where those who can speak say, "No, THAT'S not what I meant!", the severely impaired must at times be confused by our misdirected responses.

As our students move toward self advocacy, we need to move away from assumptions and attitudes that may interfere. The severely impaired will need us as advocates in the future. In doing so, we have their unspoken trust and an enormous responsibility. If we learn to "listen" to them now, we will know we are speaking for them when we act on their behalf. Better to advocate for a person, and be right, than from assumptions, and be wrong.

* * *

Milestones

If you have ever been on a long trip on a straight road with young children, you'll recognize this. Invariably a small (maybe tired) voice from just in back of your left ear will say, "HOW MANY MORE MILES?" (Noting that all children do it with the same inflection, the theory is that children receive training in this, and other phenomenon, prior to birth). A typical response is a

reassuring, "just a little farther...". Rarely do we respond with a cheery, "Isn't it exciting how far we have COME already?" In our focus on the destination, we feel the weight of how FAR we have to go. We can forget to notice the passing milemarkers.

As parents and educators, we can also become fixed on where we want to BE. We may notice- but fail to take note- of important milestones. This month, we decided not to make that mistake. Below are "firsts" we took note of this month...

- Our very warmest congratulations to our first graduate, Tom. He recently was placed in supported employment at SquirtPak in Holland. We knew he could do it, now Holland does, too. From all of us who worked with and still love Tom (and this would be a long, long list), "Congratulations!" Show 'em how it's done!

- For the first time, we have a student placed in an advanced class. Joel is placed in Theatre II, with regular education teacher Chris Terpstra. Chris was the first regular education teacher at Jenison High School to have our students (all eight!) attend her class. Our best wishes to Joel for continued success in Theatre!

- It's a record! On 1/16/90 Donna completed four full trays of salads in less than one and one half hour. Take it from someone who has been there, this is impressive!

- It's the first time we've adapted a regional conference! More in the next Morning News.

* * *

Everyone Clap Award

We've got a student that has re-written the work ethic! Periodically, one student in our project is the focus of extensive data collection by a team from Western Michigan University. Recently, that student was Eric. When Eric was asked by the interviewer from WMU to leave his work station at Herman Miller to be interviewed, he politely refused. It was not his break, he explained, and permission had not been granted by his teacher or Herman Miller supervisor. We are proud of Eric's understanding and respect for the chain of command, his responsibility to his job, and his ability to express this to a visitor. Eric's attitude, skills, and determination have been integral to his independence and achievement at this site and others. Congratulations, Eric, you are