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VIEWS ON REHABILITATION OF THE HANDICAPPED

First, let me thank you for the honor of sharing this occasion with you. During the past couple of years I have had an opportunity to speak on several occasions about rehabilitation of our handicapped citizens. In March of 1970, I addressed an Easter Fund Raising Dinner. In September of 1970 I spoke to the Governor's Committee on Employment of the Handicapped. In April of 1971, I made a statement on Rehabilitation Day to the General Assembly. Last July, I had the privilege of dedicating Camp Easter in the Pines, near Southern Pines, which is an outstanding recreational facility for the handicapped. Just last Wednesday, I delivered an address to the North Carolina Rehabilitation Counseling Association in Raleigh, North Carolina.

In preparing remarks for presentation to these groups and in meeting hundreds of wonderful individuals at these affairs, I have been newly awakened to one of the greatest needs now facing this society. For far too long, we have thought of our handicapped citizens as a social problem, in terms of what society must do for them.

I have not come to you tonight to talk about the problems of the handicapped. I submit to you that this is the time for more realistic thinking about disabled citizens. Our society needs to provide more and better rehabilitation services to an ever increasing number of handicapped citizens. At the same time, society must learn to consider the handicapped as social resources, rather than social problems.

A hundred years ago it would have sounded very heartless and cruel to make statements like, "The handicapped should earn their own living", and "That woman in a wheelchair should learn to cook and do her own housework". Certainly a hundred years ago, few, if any, would have thought of the handicapped as having any civic or community responsibility. Today, however, these statements are not cruel, but express the deepest longings of our handicapped people. With few exceptions, our handicapped citizens do not want others to take care of them, physically or financially. They are only seeking the opportunity to care for themselves and to contribute to society.

Before going any further, we should recognize one important fact too often overlooked in respect to the handicapped. Each person is an individual and must be thought of as such.

While two people may have similar physical, mental or emotional disabilities, their ability to cope with their disability will be entirely different as a result of their economic status, family, and social backgrounds.

We are learning that no one form of treatment or social service can possibly meet the needs of all people with disabilities. One of the greatest challenges that we can face is the development and implementation of rehabilitation programs that will benefit every disabled American. As long as there is one person in our State who is physically handicapped, mentally retarded, or emotionally disturbed, who is not being served, our job will not have been completed.

As a lawyer, I do not have the skill to perform surgery and administer any form of therapy that will enable the physically handicapped to walk - to see - to talk - or gain better use of their arms and hands. Neither am I capable of training the retarded to reach the maximum level of learning, nor am I trained to help the emotionally disturbed person regain his sense of worth and belonging.

Does this mean that Bob Morgan has no responsibility to the handicapped of North Carolina? That I can do nothing for my fellow citizen who has a disability? I think not and I hope not!

While each disabled person must have the skills of specially trained people, we must never forget that these specialists are dependent upon an ~~enlightened public to~~ carry on their work, whether they be in a state supported or privately supported program. It is only through an enlightened public that the disabled in our state and nation will receive a chance to lead a productive and meaningful life.

It has become increasingly clear that all levels of government - local, state and federal - must join with many private organizations in providing greater opportunities to the handicapped. As I attempt to serve the people of North Carolina in public office, as I am often asked to state my views, legal and otherwise, on matters affecting the State.

If someone was foolish enough to propose that the State give every handicapped citizen enough income to live on without working, I would oppose it. Not only because the State couldn't afford it, but because most handicapped people do not want this kind of assistance. They want and deserve far more than a monthly dole. Among the things they seek are the best medical and restorative services available, proper education, and vocational training. In the world of employment, they seek to be judged on their ability, not their disability. While laws alone cannot solve the problems of the handicapped, they can improve the social climate in which the handicapped individual must function.

Aside from rehabilitation and employment, progressive legislation is essential in such areas as proper housing and transportation for the handicapped. It has been found that the elimination of architectural barriers in all public buildings is essential if the handicapped are to function properly in the community.

I pledge to you tonight that whether in or out of public office, I will do everything within my power to awaken the public and the various levels of government to the scope of the disability problem and the benefits which accrue from investing in rehabilitation efforts.

All of you know the outstanding employment record which handicapped workers as a group have compiled. Statistics show that not only do the handicapped return ten dollars in taxes for every dollar spent on rehabilitation, but they are also expected to contribute one-half billion dollars to the State's economy during a normal working year.

I do not ask or expect an employer to give any man, whether deaf, blind, or crippled, special consideration, but only that the same consideration be given to the handicapped as to any other prospective employee.

I recently had the privilege of participating in a program at which an "Employer Award of Merit" for hiring the handicapped was given to the Magnavox Company of Tennessee, an Asheville firm which manufactures plastic moldings for radio and television cabinets.

This firm has no written policy, but has the understanding that each person will be considered on his own merit and ability, and not be penalized just because of a handicap. Magnavox has encouraged recruitment of the handicapped by working closely with several counselors in the local Vocational Rehabilitation Office. They also accept referrals from the Employment Security Commission, the local sheltered workshops, and from the psychiatric hospital. Out of a total of 395 employees, 22 are handicapped.

Your very presence here tonight is a testimony to your faith that no man need be bound by the circumstances or conditions of his birth or other handicaps. Many of you know Judge Fred Hedrick of the North Carolina Court of Appeals. Judge Hedrick, who has been blind since early in his childhood, views his handicap in this way, and I quote, "Blindness is a handicap, perhaps, if you are looking for perfection, but nobody is perfect. Everybody has some kind of personal handicap. I think of other handicaps and I really can't complain. I have, after all, been able to do most things. I have been fortunate to live pretty much as I wanted. The only thing I cannot do is see."

It is this attitude of Judge Hedrick and most other handicapped individuals that I know that has impressed upon me the realization that the feelings of pity, which many citizens hold for handicapped persons, must be erased by education, so that each handicapped individual may raise the level of his life to its highest possible limits.

In preparing my various talks on handicapped citizens, I have encountered countless stories of the fantastic achievements made by many handicapped individuals. I have tried to reach some resolution in my own mind as to what causes an especially handicapped person to overcome tremendous odds and reach heights that even surpass so-called normal people.

In reviewing the personal histories of such individuals as Helen Keller, and many others, I have noticed one fact over and over again, and that is that handicapped individuals almost always turn to help other handicapped citizens in an effort to expand their horizons.

The work of the North Carolina Federation for the Blind and its members is living testimony to this observation. If this spirit of help, cooperation, and action could somehow be transmitted to all segments of society, many seemingly insurmountable problems now facing society as a whole might be successfully overcome, just as the handicapped have surmounted great personal barriers and obstacles.

As I have said earlier, for too long now we have seen most disabled people as problems to be tolerated only through health maintenance and public assistance payments. Compared to social and health programs, we are spending a mere pittance on rehabilitation in North Carolina. Our newspapers proclaim our vast social problems, many of which could be greatly alleviated by Vocational Rehabilitation. Yet there is rarely a reference to Vocational Rehabilitation as a major counteracting force. Think of the potential manpower available to North Carolina if we could but look beyond the surface of the disability to the possibility of rehabilitation.

If tomorrow's newspapers would carry headlines of a discovery of gold, oil, or some other natural resource in the State of North Carolina, there would be a great excitement and there is little doubt but what the needed capital to develop and market such resources would be raised very quickly. I submit to you that if citizens are educated to think of our handicapped citizens as resources for rehabilitation, rather than problems to be tolerated, this State can and will find the money to make certain that every citizen with a handicap of any variety, has the necessary training to get a good job and do a good job.

Thank you.