

Toronto Centre For The Arts

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MACLEAN & MACLEAN

Date: Sunday, March 24.

Time: 8:30 p.m.

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Citizen Advocacy

Society outcasts are helped

By ROSEMARY McCracken
Jon Harris is angry about the way our society treats disadvantaged people.

Harris, the Director of York Region's Citizen Advocacy group favors a non-professional approach to social work.

"What good does it do if you have a Ph.D. in sociology if you hate people?"

Some non-professional people have a talent for helping people," Harris said.

Citizen Advocacy is designed to involve citizens who can give moral support and some basic physical help to disadvantaged people. Harris cites the case of a blind woman in Richmond Hill who is able to manage around her house but requires a person to write letters to her family and read her incoming mail.

"It was formerly very convenient for Metro Toronto to hide its problems in York—to place them out of the city and out of society. Citizen Advocacy is trying to get society's outcasts back into society," Harris said.

The problems encountered by Citizen advocacy are wide-ranged.

It embraces nearly all the problems of the human condition—from physical handicaps, welfare problems and old age, to psychological disturbances.

Harris stresses that they are not equipped to deal with special problems. Their job is to refer people with special problems to the right agency.

"We are the mediators between the persons outside the system and the contact within the system. We try to refer people with special problems like alcoholics to organizations such as Alcoholics Anonymous who can better help them," he said.

"People use all sorts of crutches to avoid people. We have to market Citizen Advocacy in an attractive package so that volunteers will buy it," said Harris, a former marketing specialist.

People from all walks of life express interest in voluntary social work projects. Norah Love, public relations person for the group, would like to see more elderly people involved as "advocates," the term the group uses for its voluntary help.

"We foresee businessmen becoming involved because a project like Citizen Advocacy helps the system as a preventative measure, saving taxpayers money by relieving burdens on other groups," said Love.

Harris and Love believe there is a political aspect to the non-professional approach in social work.

"The system is presently working to repress citizen's rights. If the average citizen becomes involved in helping disadvantaged people, he will see this repression," said Harris.

"Once a person is committed to an institution he loses many citizen rights. I would like to present the inmates of an institution with audio-visual equipment and have them film their "home" from their perspective," he added.

Although Citizen Advocacy has been popular in the US and Canada for several years, York Region's Citizen Advocacy organization officially started operation in January with the help of a local initiative project grant. The project is staffed by three paid workers, Harris, Love and Debbie Solomon, a York graduate.

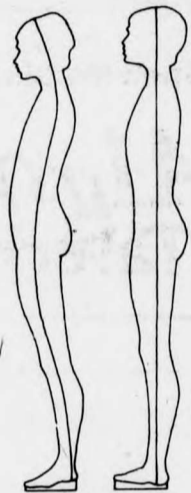
"It makes me angry to hear people say that LIP spells rip-off." Each of us makes \$100 a week plus \$20 for expenses. The \$20 rarely covers these extras and we are forced to spend much of our salaries to help the project," said Harris.

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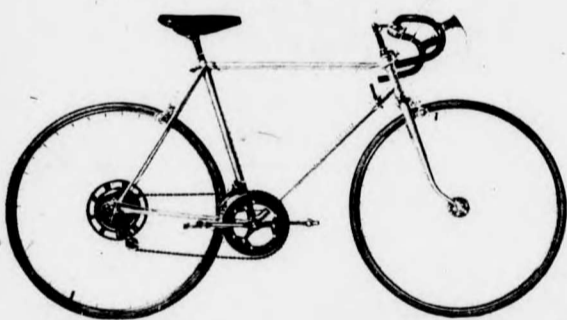
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