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Anita McIntyre
Bedford, Texas

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CONFESSIONS OF A REHAB COUNSELOR

Anita McIntyre
3028 Bedford Road, #1012
Bedford, TX 76021

Rehabilitation, as defined by the Texas Rehabilitation Commission, is helping people help themselves. If we forget the "people help themselves" part in this phrase, we strip the disabled person of his dignity, rape his self image, and cause him to prostitute his self respect.

I began my work in rehabilitation during the era of prosperity. The budget bulged with ample funding. The quality of rehabilitation being practiced was seemingly gauged not only by the number of "26's" (successfully placed handicapped people in jobs), but also, some felt, by the number of services provided. A "good" counselor was one who gave his clients every service available.

I believed my job was to MAKE deaf people successful, to GIVE them every opportunity in life. I felt they DESERVED the services rehabilitation offered. I was hired after all to *help*. I understood I was to help them help themselves. And I did. I helped them help themselves to rehabilitation smorgasbord. My intentions were honorable and I worked hard at doing the best job I could—helping.

But, after a few years fighting several brush fires of burnout, I reevaluated myself, my goals, and my methods. Many of the young deaf people I had support-serviced through college had not become the independent, self-sufficient, healthy, college educated deaf adults I had programmed for in my IWRP's (Individualized Written Rehabilitation Program). Instead they were self-centered, demanding, dependent, unjustly arrogant adult-children.

Who had failed?

I had failed. I had focused on the handicap, instead of helping them realize their responsibility in helping themselves. I had failed to ignite within them the spark of their dreams. I did not fan the flames of their ambitions, or

feed the blaze of their wherewithal, now suffocating, nearly extinguished by well-meaning "helpers" (parents, educators, counselors, and interpreters). We, helpers, had failed to challenge, to expect, even to demand they reach their potential. Instead we pampered them into dependence.

The handicap and its limitations exist. But, so, too, do personal character and courage. With these come potential, not impotence; independence, not dependence; ability, not disability.

The client had failed. He had failed to recognize, with or without my help, his self worth. A life can only reach its full potential when challenged to stretch beyond what is comfortable and easy. Sacrifice may be an uncomfortable state to live in, but everyone should make a visit to allow character strengths to develop.

The American system had failed. Through political manipulation we had been seduced into believing we deserved to be helped and cared for by our government. To gain our vote, politicians mesmerized us into accepting "free and easy" as better.

I thank God for tightened purse strings in recent years. This gives counselors the opportunity to be encouragers, not doers; to be counselors, not purchasing agents. It creates an opportunity for the handicapped person to gain not only an awareness of his potential, but a challenge to exercise his character and develop his wherewithal through self-sacrifice. A muscle unused withers, a mind undeveloped retards, a life unchallenged only exists.

Rehabilitation is NOT bad. Helping only harms when the person helped could do it himself. Then, it becomes handicapping. Rehabilitation was never meant to handicap people but to help handicapped people HELP THEMSELVES.