

# Program links students with disabled citizens

By June Russell  
Emerald Reporter

Debbie Jones is becoming a matchmaker.

As part of a practicum experience, this human services major is working to link University students with people with disabilities through Fostering Friendships, a program of Lane County's Association for Retarded citizens.

The program matches volunteers and people with disabilities based on expressed preferences of age, gender and interest. Although most of the volunteers are education, psychology or human services majors, the program is open to anyone willing to make the two-term time commitment.

"Right now the program is just getting going for the school year," said Jones, the Fostering Friendships volunteer coordinator. "We have more on the waiting list than are currently paired. There's about four pairs now, and more than 30 waiting to be paired with volunteers."

The program started four years ago through a grant from the Oregon Research Institute. Today, grants from the State Youth Commission add to funding for the program from ORI, the United Way and other fundraising activities.

Volunteers are required to pledge two to three hours a week to the program, and can earn up to three practicum credits through ESCAPE or their departments.

The result of the matchmak-

ing and time commitment is not another baby-sitting job, but often the foundation of a lasting friendship.

"What we're trying to do is foster a friendship between the volunteer and the person," said Jones. "What we're hoping is that they build a real friendship that goes beyond the requirements of the program. That's not always possible, but for many volunteers they become part of the family."

Before linking with a person in the program, volunteers participate in a three-hour training session and short interview with a coordinator. Volunteers learn more about different disabilities and play games that demonstrate what it is like to be disabled.

"The volunteers are people who are responsible, energetic and genuine," Jones said. "They need to really want to get to know someone. They don't need to know anything about disabilities."

After the volunteers are linked with a volunteer, the coordinators are available for advice and support. But the building of the friendship and choice of activities are up to the linked pair.

"They can go bowling, to the movies, the library, or any community activity that they both have agreed on, whether it's baking cookies to going to a football game," Jones said.

Nancy Moen, a pre-human services major, recently entered the program. Their first outing, she said, was a terrific experi-

ence.

"We bonded," Moen said. "We went out to Valley River and window shopped and got to get to know each other."

"My goal is to get her involved in something like joining a spa or club, something with members and activities that she can do, so that if I have to leave, she won't be alone," she said. "She's very social."

One thing volunteers discover, Jones said, is that the range of activities are limited only by their imagination. Contrary to popular myth, people with disabilities have the same interests and sense of humor as anyone else.

"When I started, I had no idea about people with disabilities," Jones said. "I went in thinking they'd be different, and I found they're just like other kids."

Moen agreed, and said she was surprised at how capable disabled persons actually are.

"I think people do have the preconceived notion that they're different, or not intelligent enough to be like other people, but they are," Moen said.

The program is part of a movement toward mainstreaming people with disabilities back into classrooms and the community instead of being separated or shunted or pushed aside.

"Our community is real open to things that are going on and getting people into the mainstream of society," Jones said.

"For example, the bus system is really good in this com-

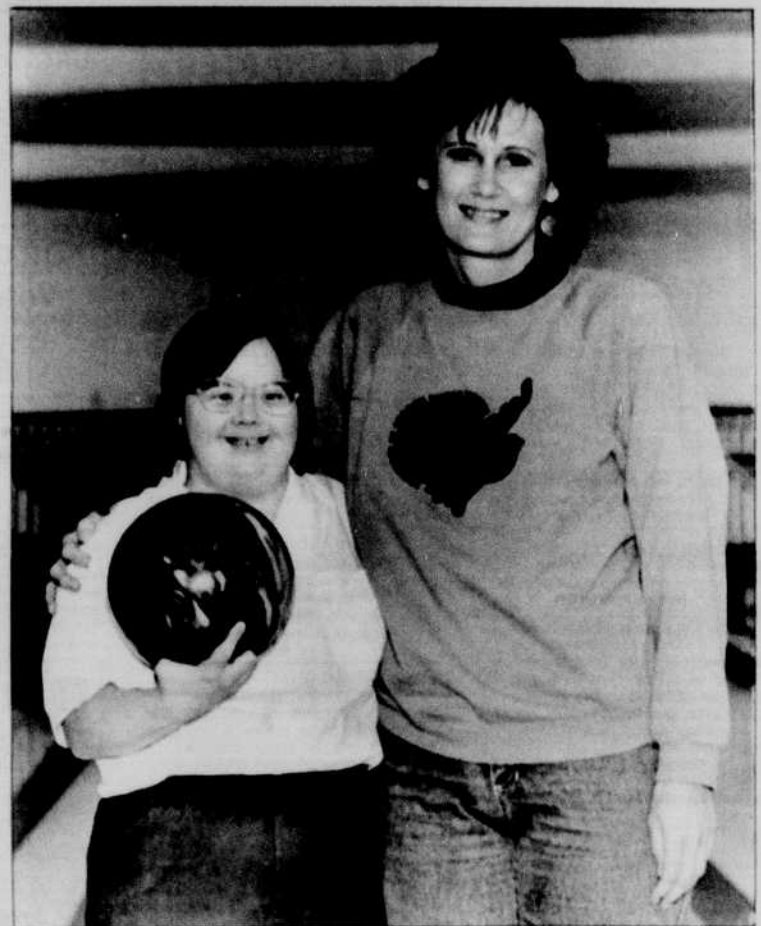


Photo by Sean Poston

Nancy Moen (right) spends a morning bowling with Linda Sullivan as part of Fostering Friendships, a program bringing together University students and handicapped citizens.

munity," she said. "The disabled people can go anywhere. There's nothing holding them back, except the fears that our culture needs to get over."

Mainstreaming, Moen said, is one of the ways to combat the fear society has of persons

with disabilities.

"What it'll take is more exposure," Moen said. "The more we can get them back into the mainstream, the more barriers we're going to break down."

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