

family

A D V O C A C Y

PO Box 502
Epping NSW 1710

305/16-18 Cambridge St
Epping NSW 2121

Phone: (02) 9869 0866
Facsimile: (02) 9869 0722

Record

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Author: Hartman, Tari

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Abstract

Our attitudes, about ourselves and others, are shaped by our experiences, and are influenced by what we see and read in the media. This article discusses bringing the disability movement to the media so that they can responsibly replace images of stigma, fear and prejudice with new awareness and accurate information. **Keyword: Attitudes**

MEDIA EMPOWERMENT

By Tari Susan Hartman

Thus far, most of our TASH Media Committee efforts have targeted print. In addition, we are now expanding our focus to include television, radio and film. In subsequent issues we'd like to highlight upcoming examples of disability portrayals, discuss strategies of media empowerment and development of media access skills.

Our attitudes, about ourselves and others, are shaped by our experiences in reality, and are influenced by images projected on TV/film screens, heard on radio, and/or read in print. Often times, negative images create more of a "collective handicap" than one's own "individual disability."

Before America's 43 million men, women and children with disabilities can expect to see and/or hear more realistic media portrayals, we need to take a more active, assertive and articulate role in the process. As a community, our feedback is valid and vital - change cannot happen without us. We must empower ourselves to improve images, so that people with disabilities will be woven into the perceptual tapestry of the media's mainstream American life.

Negative media images stem from an unconscious creative process that oftentimes warehouses outdated information, perceptions, stigma, prejudice and fear. It surfaces in the form of antiquated portrayals and offensive language. Let's begin to bring the disability rights movement to media professionals, so they can responsibly replace old myths with "new and improved" awareness and accurate information. We must begin to react to media situations before, during and after their occurrences. We can use these opportunities to maximise efforts. Here are two examples:

KFI-radio Los Angeles - July 22, 1991

While most of us were celebrating and reflecting upon the First Anniversary of the historic signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act - our Emancipation Proclamation - a nationally syndicated substitute talk show radio host (**Jane Norris**) was defaming a broadcast colleague with a disability.

Bree Walker-Lampley, a prominent Los Angeles KCBS-TV news anchor has ectrodactylism (fusing of bones in hands and feet). Bree is pregnant with a second child. Ectrodactylism is passed on genetically, with independent 50/50 chance of occurrence. Jane's two hour discussion: **Is Bree Walker socially responsible, knowing her baby has a 50/50 chance of being born with her "deforming and disfiguring disease?" Is it fair to have a baby knowing there will be "one strike against it" at birth?**

Who does Jane Norris think she is? As a community we should be outraged by this attack.

Callers who confronted Jane's prejudice, ignorance and audacity, in that her discussion smacked of eugenics (the science of creating a perfect race), were

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dismissed, cut off or challenged. Those who seemingly agreed with Jane were allowed to continue.

The "on-air expert" **Dr. Steven York**, quipped in a cavalier tone that some of these children can't hold a pencil and the jobs of typists and surgeons were definitely out. Parents talked of their children with disabilities that were better off having died, instead of being a burden to family members. One woman asked what Bree was trying to prove by having a baby. Another remembers that as a kid, neighbourhood adults told her she should live in the sanitarium with her brother, in case his mental retardation was contagious. Some said they would rather be dead than disabled, and they would abort a foetus with a disability. One man said he heard of adults with disabilities suing their parents for not aborting them.

All of this incredible discussion was done under the guise of Jane Norris' ponderings of having a child of her own someday. After all, she says, "Kids are cruel." Jane confesses that she knows what it's like - during high school she had to wear a 25 pound brace to correct her scoliosis, and made up stories about falling off a motorcycle because she felt ashamed at not being perfect. Why is she unloading her unresolved self-loathing on Bree and our community by using the airwaves to perpetuate hatred, prejudice, stigma? The world is full of ignorant people like Jane Norris. Fortunately they don't have nationally syndicated talk radio programs. This isn't an isolated incident. There's a strong social trend placing pressure on pregnant women to have prenatal screening and to have an abortion if the foetus has a disability. This pressure is from the field of medicine, the insurance industry and society as a whole.

If any of you heard this 7/22 radio show, please call us. We are currently organising a grass-roots reaction with a letter-writing campaign and filing a complaint with the FCC. We have a limited number of tapes available for organisations to respond. Tapes are being sent to a "small circle of friends" including: TASH, Parent Network, UCPA, ADD, ARC, PCEPWD, NDSC, UAP's NESS, DREDF, NICHCY, NDAC, WID, SDS, EEOC, National Council on Disability, NCIL, CCD, OSERS, TIRR, ILRU, ADAPT, Center on Human Policy, Senate subcommittee on Disability Policy, Alliance of Genetic Support Groups, etc. Please duplicate the tapes and share them with colleagues. At press time, we are solidifying our strategy. If you are interested in joining the fight by writing a letter and signing on to our complaint with the FCC, please contact us for more specifics: **Tari Susan Hartman** and **Barbara Faye Waxman**; EIN SOF Communications; 6380 Wilshire Blvd., Suite #150, Los Angeles, CA 90048; (213) 874-5860 (voice/TDD). In subsequent issues, we will keep you posted of our plans/progress and share some reactions from disability community leaders.

Jerry Lewis MDA Telethon - Sept 1-2, 1991

For the past 25 years, **Jerry Lewis** has chosen to publicly defame and infantilise people with disabilities while in the process of raising money for the Muscular Dystrophy Association. As he tries to do so again this year, "Jerry's Orphans" are fighting back.

At the epicentre of this grass-roots guerilla effort is the Chicago-based Access Ability Advocates. At the helm are **Cris Matthews** and **Mike Ervin**. They are calling upon people with disabilities, their friends and families to organise boycotts of local Jerry Lewis Labor Day Telethons nationwide. Matthews and Ervin, former MDA poster children, believe that the time has come to eliminate the negativism, paternalism and despair perpetuated by the annual event.

In a September 1990 Parade magazine article, Lewis talks about how he perceives life would be with a neuromuscular disability. Matthews and Ervin contend that "Lewis insists on painting the most pathetic, humiliating, degrading portrait he can of disability and refuses to see life as it is. He uses offensive language such as "cripple" and "half a person". The telethon must be changed in a positive way to reflect real lives of people with disabilities.

Demonstrations are being organised for those of you that live in or near a "Love Network" city airing a local telethon. The telethon's corporate sponsors are being targeted with requests to remove Jerry Lewis as host and spokesman. For more information, contact **Cris Matthews** and **Mike Ervin**; Access Ability Associates, P.O. Box 388246, Chicago, IL 60638. (312) 477-3120 or (312) 477-1172.

TV Feedback

The 1991 television season is gearing up for production. In addition to *McGyver* and *Life Goes On*, catch *Reasonable Doubts* on NBC. In this new show, Academy Award-winner **Marlee Matlin** (*Children of a Lesser God*) will portray an assistant district attorney and **Mark Harmon** will play her colleague. We would like to have your feedback on these programs and other single episodes that deal with the disability issues and experiences. Next issue we will discuss strategies for improvement of television images of people with disabilities.

***Tari Susan Hartman** (of EIN SOF Communications) is a member of TASH's Media Committee. Twelve years ago, she spearheaded the creation of SAG's Committee of Performers with Disabilities and then served as Executive Director of the Media Access Office (liaison between the disability community and entertainment industry to improve portrayals and increase employment opportunities). EIN SOF developed marketing campaigns for MY LEFT FOOT, MAC AND ME and WIOU. As production consultants for EQUAL JUSTICE, they helped to develop a storyline about a woman attorney with a disability, her relationships, and the political struggle for independent living.*