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## Campaign urges looking at, not away from, those with disabilities

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People with disabilities deserve respect. So look them in the eye.

That is the message behind a “Look Me in the Eye” campaign, organized by the Oregon Supported Living Program and Full Access, which launches today at 11 a.m. at the two organizations’ joint office building at 1240 Charnelton St.

“We’re encouraging people to go out on a limb of discomfort and open their arms to people who have for so many years experienced such grave injustices,” organizer Gretchen Dubie said.

Mayors from nine Lane County cities — Lowell, Cottage Grove, Oakridge, Florence, Creswell, Junction City, Veneta, Eugene and Springfield — have committed to signing a proclamation that urges citizens to acknowledge and embrace community members with developmental disabilities. Eugene Mayor Kitty Piercy will read the proclamation at today’s kickoff event.

“I think it’s a wonderful campaign, and I’m happy to be a part of it,” Piercy said. “Eye to eye with everybody. That’s the way it should be — in every community, in every city. It’s important that we all learn to treat each other fairly.”

Other speakers will include Springfield Mayor Sid Leiken and Bev Smith, executive director of Kidsports.

The campaign seeks to address a societal problem: How do we, and should we, act around a community member with a disability? Have we been so conditioned by the childhood reprimand of “don’t stare” that we intentionally avoid eye contact all together?

“People just stereotype us,” said Susan Manson, 49, tears welling in her eyes. “Just because we’re different doesn’t mean we don’t have feelings. We just have things that aren’t working as well.”

Manson, who is bipolar and has mild mental retardation, lives in a supported living house with three other women, all with developmental disabilities — and all with vibrant personalities.

“They’re like any other group of girls, getting together, talking about boys,” Dubie said.

Vickie Anderson, 49, tells the group how she is getting ready for a trip to Europe. Manson is gearing up for an overnight stay with her husband, Gary Manson, who resides in another supported living house.

“I love my ‘family’ here,” said Mary Suzanne, who has spina bifida. “We may be in wheelchairs, we may have disabilities, but we’re just like you. We are people just like you.”

Although Anderson works at the Eugene Water & Electric Board, and Suzanne and Manson work for the Oregon Supported Living Program, they all have emotional tales of previous job hunting and rejection.

“They said, ‘We don’t take disabled, we only take people who are fast,’ ” Manson said of applying to a pizza parlor.

When it comes to social interactions, the women agree that eye contact is a good start.

“Look us in the eye, treat us like anyone else,” Suzanne implored.

Dubie said it’s inherent among humans to notice people’s differences. “It’s deeply rooted within us to be afraid of differences as much as it is deeply rooted in us to help people,” she said.

That’s where the nonprofit Oregon Supported Living Program, and Full Access — a brokerage established in 2002 as a result of a class action lawsuit filed on behalf of five individuals with developmental disabilities who did not receive services for which they were eligible — come in.

“Our message is, it’s OK not to know. It’s OK to ask,” Dubie said.

The mayoral proclamation includes designating next week as “Look me in the eye” week, with signs to be posted urging community members to break down the barriers between the populations. The organizations will also participate in the Eugene Celebration and other future events.

“We’re going to walk in the (celebration) parade with our T-shirts, smile, let people know we’re here,” said capital chairman Rick Dancer. “We’ve been talking about taking this to the schools and increasing (the campaign) to other places.”

Dancer became involved with the supported living program because his brother-in-law has cerebral palsy. Through his experience with the program, Dancer said he’s come to deeply respect the work put in by program advocates.

“(People with disabilities) know, they get it, and they hurt,” Dancer said about people avoiding communication. “There are simple things we can do to change that, and they deserve it.”

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## **LOOK ME IN THE EYE**

The text of the proclamation that mayors of nine communities in Lane County have agreed to sign:

Whereas, all citizens want and deserve the opportunity to safely and meaningfully participate in all aspects of our community, including recreation, education, work, social and civic activities; and

Whereas, our communities can grow closer through education, awareness, understanding and seeing one another, and benefit from recognizing each other’s abilities, commonalities and differences; and

Whereas, our communities gain value as they are more aware of the capabilities of, and provide opportunities for, individuals with developmental disabilities to be part of their communities; and

Whereas, it is in the public’s interest to offer individuals with developmental disabilities an opportunity to live and work in our communities where they can exercise their full rights and responsibilities as citizens; and

Whereas, individuals with developmental disabilities and other citizens are unnoticed, ignored and excluded:

Now, therefore, we do hereby proclaim Aug. 15-21, 2010, to be “Look Me in the Eye” week and encourage all citizens of our community to participate in seeing one another.

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