

State and Local

Graduate student spends time helping handicapped people

Muse is executive director of non-profit garden center

By Kathryn McMinn
Reporter

Wheelchairs, ramps, widened doorways — all are a part of life for the handicapped. Each must adjust to a world ill-equipped to handle their wants and needs.

Although a familiar sight in our everyday world, not everybody can accept these people and their imperfections.

Who, then, are the people who teach, encourage and love the handicapped?

Richard Muse, with sweat dripping from his brow and an ever-present grin across his face, charges through the parking lot like an electron orbiting its nucleus, cursing the Texas sun all the while.

The tall, heavy-set executive director of Geranium Junction — a non-profit garden center run by the disabled — hails from Washington state, with a bit of a northern accent still on his tongue.

Muse began working with the disabled during his junior year in high school.

"I chose to become a member of the Student Council for Exceptional Children, a high-school affiliate of the national Council for Exceptional Children," Muse says. "I suppose I could have tried out for the glee club or science club, but this seemed much more interesting."

"We spent time with disabled children, learning to care for them and work with them," he says. "I never had a problem working with the disabled. We all have disabilities of one type or another. When I take off my glasses, it is difficult for me to see, so that counts as a disability."

Muse leaned forward in his seat, his voice rising in his determination to make a point.

"Please let me stand on my soapbox for a moment," he says. "Disabilities do not mean that you cannot function or have an intelligent thought. Having a disability simply means just that — you have a disability. When your disability prevents you from completing day-to-day tasks, then it becomes a handicap."

After graduating from high school, Muse moved to Flagstaff, Ariz. and received an undergraduate degree in vocational education.

Although he spent several years teaching secondary special education classes to people with developmental disabilities, Muse also engaged in other forms of work, including driving nails for a construction company and working at a sawmill.

"I basically bounced around doing a lot of different things," he says. "Working for the construction company paid well, but I just didn't enjoy it."

"We all have a variety of interests and I think for me, it would be diffi-



Photo by Carolyn Garca

Richard Muse, right, executive director of Geranium Junction, offers some pointers to employee Albert Glover as he gives the foliage a cool drink. The shop is located at 2510 Texas Ave. in Bryan.

cult to stand at a copy machine eight hours a day. I have to be out doing, seeing and interacting with people to be happy."

Muse's desire to further his career in the education field brought him to Texas A&M, where he is working on his master's degree.

"I finally decided to work on my master's in vocational education at A&M when I was offered this position at Geranium Junction," he says.

On top of his classes and research, Muse says he spends well over 40 hours a week at Geranium Junction.

"Besides working at the center itself, I am required to attend board meetings and city council meetings — which is where I'm supposed to be now," he says.

"I've been referred to by people as a true workaholic," he says. "I enjoy my work; it makes working easy. It's

vital to me — probably, in many ways, one of the most important things I have experienced.

"I prefer my line of work," he says. "I'm content with it. It's interesting. It's fun."

Although seemingly invincible, Muse says there are times when he faces many frustrations. He particularly disagrees with many administrative tactics.

"We're all covering under this back-to-basics thing," Muse says. "If you take a person who is 18 years old and is reading at a third-grade level, we're not going to remediate. Remediate means something we can fix. Disabilities, handicaps and mental retardation are not fixable; they are things we must accept."

"The school systems and state programs should concentrate on training these individuals toward

something more appropriate to their needs and wants. Instead, they often use a system that places them randomly in whatever training programs and jobs happen to be available and convenient in order to fill that slot.

"With the money allotted to handicapped programs, the dollars should go to the individuals themselves, to be placed in a position they enjoy. Instead, they go directly to the programs. What benefits do the handicapped receive if they aren't training in an area they are capable of and happy working in?"

"I don't mean to be cynical toward the school systems; I mean to be a support system for them. There are many things I can think of within the system that could stand revitalization, but then I guess that could be said for any organization."

In order for improvements to be made within the handicapped programs, Muse says, people must be open to change.

"I look at myself more as a change agent than as a director, boss or supervisor," he says. "There is always need for constant change and it must start with those in charge."

Muse's co-workers respect the changes he has brought to Geranium Junction.

"I can remember having a bunch of white petunias in stock, but needing pink ones for my customer," says Byron Utz, a senior at A&M and owner of Fairview Nursery. "I loaded the petunias in my truck and took them to Geranium Junction to see if they might trade with me. Muse switched flowers without any questions asked at all. I think that depicts a good businessman as well as a good person."

Change for the better results from those willing to take a risk and to accept people for who they are, Muse says.

"There are times when I don't know how to respond to people with certain types of handicaps," he says. "We're all human, and there are just certain things we are conditioned to accept and reject."

"Because of our differences, our levels of acceptance range. We cannot, however, close our minds to those who differ from us mentally or physically. It is not my place to condemn a person to a life of institutions simply because he or she has limitations as to what he or she is capable of handling."

After receiving his master's degree from A&M, Muse hopes to move on in his field by working with staff development in local school districts.

"A lot of us base how we view our lives on past experiences," he says. "I have had many fine experiences working with the handicapped. What it all boils down to are personal and professional values."

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Men accused of gun-running denied bail

HOUSTON (AP) — Two Louisiana men indicted on weapons and conspiracy charges were ordered held without bail after prosecutors showed videotapes of the men discussing plans to commit crimes, including weapons sales to Iran.

Martin David Johnson, 31, and James Charles Smith, 51, are each charged with seven weapons violations and one charge each of conspiring to rob and assault a state-registered weapons dealer. The indictment was returned Wednesday by a federal grand jury.

During a hearing before U.S. Magistrate Karen Brown, prosecutors said investigators had made about 100 clandestine videotapes of the men discussing plans to sell gunboats to Iran, launder drug money, steal grenades from a national armory and distribute drugs.

The men were arrested July 10 following a six-month investigation by the FBI and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, during which agents bought five machine guns from the pair, authorities said.

During one videotape played Wednesday, Smith was shown bragging about three contract murders he performed and of his expertise with explosives and poisons.

Johnson was identified as president and chief executive officer of Allied Offshore Marine Corp., based in Morgan City, La. which provides equipment vessels for offshore drilling rigs. Smith is an employee of Johnson.

Senate passes bill allowing nuclear waste site at El Paso

AUSTIN (AP) — State senators passed a bill Thursday that would allow a low-level radioactive waste site to be located near El Paso — whether or not El Paso wants it.

The bill, approved 28-2, goes next to the House. Sen. Judy Zaffirini, D-Laredo, said the bill was needed to help end the long controversy over location of a place to dispose of low-level wastes produced as by-products of medical, industrial and research activities.

Currently such wastes produced in Texas are shipped to Washington state, Nevada and South Carolina. But Texas faces a 1991 deadline to provide its own site.

"The reason you want the site in Hudspeth County (near El Paso) is so they won't put it in your district," said Sen. Tati Santiesteban, D-El Paso.

Zaffirini said, "If the site is not put in Hudspeth County, we will have to spend another \$10 million to find another site and it could be located in anybody's district."

Close vote by Dallas City Council places 7 judges on paid leave

DALLAS (AP) — The city's chief administrative judge and six other municipal judges have until Monday to respond to the Dallas City Council's decision placing them on paid leave.

A divided council voted 6-5 Wednesday in favor of the move, which proponents called the first step in revamping the court and firing the judges.

The sweep of the bench was necessary because Administrative Judge Richard Sacks has been unable to control other judges and because of petty charges made by the associate judges in a so-called mutiny against

Sacks, council members said. Only two judges remain on the bench.

"Right now, the system isn't working, partly because of the personalities involved," said Councilman Craig Holcomb, who voted in favor of placing the judges on paid leave. "We're going to try to see if a new system will work."

Dallas Mayor Annette Strauss, who cast a favorable vote, said the council will meet Wednesday to decide whether the judges should be removed. She said a task force would be appointed to study the municipal court system and suggest improvements.

A secretary said Sacks was on vacation and the other judges were in court when calls for comment were made Thursday by the Associated Press. The judges also declined comment after the council meeting.

Bradley Lollar, president of the Dallas Criminal Bar Association, said, "We feel that in firing the judges and then appointing a study committee, the council has put the cart before the horse."

In May, the six municipal judges gave the council a report asking for the removal of Sacks. They claimed he had mismanaged the office and misappropriated funds.

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