

## **Time for women with disabilities to speak out**

**By Marilyn Lukach**

There is nothing like a room full of dynamic women to get an exciting program off the ground. That's what happened at a recent forum I attended concerning, according to the brochure, "social issues, relationships and sexual health regarding women with disabilities."

Sponsored by The Women with Disabilities Health Care Task Force, the New Jersey Council on Developmental Disabilities, and the Speicher-Rubin Women's Center at New Jersey City University, this program was titled "Celebrating Women ... where we've been, where we are, where we're going."

The topics ranged from lack of fundamental health care for women with disabilities to their social life, the need for understanding from the public, and governmental issues.

The keynote speaker was Kate Blisard, an energetic advocate for women's concerns. Her forthright nature made her a natural to discuss subjects that are personal and intimate to all women.

She used the word "mosaic" to describe the many women in the room. We were of all nationalities and all ages. We had different physical and mental challenges and were at different stages of life, but she said, "We have the same hopes and dreams like any other woman."

Blisard spoke about the sad truth of finding an understanding physician who truly understands women with disabilities. Most of the time, their general health is ignored and preventive medicine is almost nonexistent. The Dark Ages are alive and well in the medical profession, and doctors, therapists, and caregivers must realize that ignorance and prejudice can no longer be accepted.

Every woman in the room was on an individual journey, and Blisard used the words "hard-earned wisdom, empathy and humor" to describe the everyday challenges faced in a world that has a tendency to see physically and mentally challenged women as "helpless, useless and sexless human beings." Nothing could be further from the truth.

A lively panel discussion brought up a variety of subjects, including intimacy and privacy in respect to relationships, the underserved disabled lesbian population, and mental health issues.

Panelist Paulette Eberle is a freelance journalist who writes and works as a strong advocate for equal rights for all people with disabilities. She just happens to be blind. With her guide dog Prudy at her side, she described herself as an "old war horse" that has been through just about everything.

Eberle discussed what she saw as a fact: that female children with disabilities are seen as having little value to society, and their wants and needs are secondary to their nondisabled sisters. They are not encouraged to be whole persons but asexual individuals. I found her to be a thought-provoking presenter.

Other panelists discussed self image and self esteem and finding a life partner who can adjust and understand the disability as well as the individual. One of the conclusions reached was that women must become more politically active to foster change, especially when it comes to our health.

It may have been a small group, but we agreed that it had been a mighty one. Blisard finished by talking about the small miracles she has seen for challenged women over the years. We do have better education, more acknowledgement and recognition, meaningful jobs and value, which comes as we value ourselves more. We do have a contribution to make to this world, and remember, "equality is never achieved alone."

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