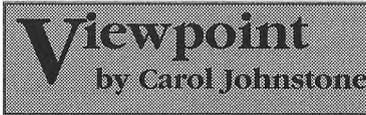


Dignity can be found in a label

In the Feb. 17 issue of the *North End News*, I wrote an article on the Job Brokerage Centre (JBC) called, "Not creatures to be afraid of." The next day JBC director Leslie Graham called me at home and asked for a retraction. Graham objected to the headline, as well as the characterization of office manager Gordon Publicover as "wheel-chair bound" and the lead interviewee, Thomas Watt, as a "high-functioning autistic."

She said these references distorted the efforts of the JBC to make people - especially potential employers - look at the disabled not as autistics or paraplegics, but as individuals with bankable skills and dignity.

But it's not possible to describe what JBC does without describing



its clients. Some of the very characteristics that define some disabilities also define hidden strengths.

For example, high-functioning autism is sometimes characterized by attention to detail, acute observation and a "photographic" type memory ability. If channelled, these abilities would be very useful or "bankable." Thomas Watt, the JBC client interviewed for the article, is a perfect case in point. He types 68 words a minute nearly perfectly and learned Word Perfect 6.0 in one sitting.

JBC is helping about 80 "disabled" adults from all over Metro.

My son, Zeb, is one of them. He's been labelled "pre-autistic" and "post-autistic" and currently sits with the label "developmentally disabled."

He's dyslexic but he's learned how to read. He reads the newspapers daily. He keeps up with current events and job listings. He really wants a job. Like Watt, he's highly motivated. Unlike Watt, he doesn't have a job yet. To get him the services he needs — special education classes, occupational therapy, speech therapy and job counselling — we've had to acknowledge his disability.

Dignity doesn't come from not being labelled, it comes from within — from acknowledging limitations and strengths, from self-respect and a little help from a friend — like the JBC.