

John "Jack" Rowan

Audio transcript: On Center for Independent Living, Berkeley, as "melting pot" in the late seventies and early eighties

Date: October 3, 1998

Interviewer: Sharon Bonney

Note: Transcripts have been lightly edited; therefore there may be slight discrepancies with audio clips.

Bonney:

Another question I have about CIL is what were the race relations like at CIL?

Rowan:

CIL was one intense melting pot of everything. There were primarily Caucasian people working there. A few African Americans came in down the line. One of the early guys, I can't remember his name, he was blind. He always used to knock me out because he was one of the most sharply dressed guys—every day—that I had ever come across. I thought, this guy's blind and he dresses so sharp. He was just into clothes, he and his wife had this whole trip going, and he knew what he wanted and how he wanted it. Apparently he had some vision in his youth; he got hit in the head with an arrow and lost his sight as a child.

When we were trying to set up—he was head of blind services—and when we were running into money/grant problems, that was the first overt racial thing I ever remember coming up at CIL. Somehow he or somebody was putting it across that it didn't want to make the blind service unit grow bigger simply because we didn't want a black person running it. The thought had never even entered my mind. I thought, Where in the world is this coming from?

There was another guy that we hired who was African American, and he was hired under an independent living grant. He was just a flaming, outrageous, gay dude. Also more happy-go-lucky than hard-working, politically-motivated. Those things kind of clashed with some of the staff. Then a couple of Asian women. But I don't ever remember any kind of racial discussions or slurs or hostilities coming up; it was more like this huge experiment.

The big issues I remember were for gay men and women. We had a big influx in the ratio on the staff of gay men and women. The gay rights movement was just starting out hot then, too. In San Francisco the gay men's movement was strong, and in Berkeley and around CIL there started to be a real strong gay women's movement that seemed to be more Berkeley than San Francisco. Then the disabled, gay women's movement was even more strong and very active and very overt to the point where it got to be like a joke, if you will, or a syndrome. Every disabled woman that showed up in Berkeley from elsewhere would right away get hit by the

welcoming committee on—if you want to be really liberated—you need to be a full sister. This indoctrination committee would be out there. "Have you been hit by this squad yet?" [chuckles]

We had Hispanic guys working there. I don't remember. So much of it was disability-focused, and it was like there were people who were blind, people who were deaf, people who were post-polio, there was multiple sclerosis, and everybody was trying to relate, to fit, to cope with, assist, be sensitive. The big deal was to be sensitive. At the same time the women's liberation movement was hitting. I remember when I was a student at Berkeley it was at the point where you couldn't ask a female student for a date without getting slapped as a male, chauvinist pig. This was all going on at the same time.

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