

# DISABILITY ACTIVISTS CELEBRATE 30 YEARS OF DAWN

BY PENNI MITCHELL



*DAWN-RAFH Canada has intervened at the Supreme Court of Canada to defend the rights of women with disabilities to testify in court without prejudice.*

For three decades, DAWN Canada has advocated for the rights of women with disabilities and Deaf women in Canada. The organization's commitment to improving accessibility, strengthening human rights protection and fighting for social justice goes back to June 1985, when 17 women with disabilities from across the country formed the organization at an Ottawa conference.

The issues were many. "A quadriplegic woman can be sterilized without her or her

husband's consent," said Joan Meister, one of DAWN's founders, in an article on the conference published in the September/October 1985 issue of *Herizons*. "Young women with disabilities have twice the chance of becoming victims of incest as their non-disabled sisters," she continued.

Accessibility to public services, events and education was another key issue. "If we can't get there, or go to the bathroom there, or hear it, or see it, or understand it, then we can't benefit from it," Meister explained.

Violence was at the top of the list of concerns for DAWN's founders. "Raped and battered women are still being put in mental institutions and drugged, often developing drug dependencies," Meister said. She noted that, "few if any rape crisis, battered women's, detox, birth control, abortion, child abuse or counselling centres are accessible; women's bookstores, meeting and daycare facilities are often inaccessible as well."

The founding DAWN conference was made possible through a grant from the Secretary of State Women's Program, a federal government branch set up in 1973 to support to women's equality organizations. It supported research projects involving a multitude of women's issues and backed a host of initiatives designed to improve the status of women.

Over the past three decades, DAWN has solidified its platform for the rights of women with disabilities and Deaf women. Most recently, the organization has spoken out on

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behalf of women with disabilities who are incarcerated in Canada's prisons. The 2007 death of Ashley Smith at a federal facility prompted DAWN to lobby for improved conditions for incarcerated women with disabilities. DAWN has also intervened at the Supreme Court of Canada to defend the rights of women with intellectual disabilities who have been sexually assaulted to testify in court without prejudice.

Today, much of the organization's work is undertaken at the international level. The organization recently participated in the

eighth Conference of States Parties to the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities at the United Nations where DAWN's In Focus Initiative to address violence against women was named one of 10 global good practices in addressing violence.

Since May 2007, DAWN's head office has been at Maison Parent-Roback, a feminist collective in Montreal. The organization has also become officially bilingual, and calls itself DAWN-RAFH Canada. Today, DAWN is the only national feminist disability organization in Canada and one of only a handful in the world.

*Find out more at: [www.dawncanada.net](http://www.dawncanada.net) ❁*