

Speaking with one voice for disabled rights

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For The Telegraph

ALTON - Arriving to cheers, advocates gathered Wednesday in Alton on the last stop of the southern route of "Freedom Quest '09" before converging in Springfield for a statewide rally.

The southern route started Tuesday morning in Carbondale and then moved on to Mount Vernon in the evening, stopping in Charleston on Wednesday morning before arriving in Alton in the afternoon.

When the caravan of eight cars pulled into IMPACT Inc.'s parking lot at 2735 E. Broadway, the riders were greeted by people chanting "Freedom Quest."

The building was festooned in red, white and blue banners and balloons. The riders were welcomed with signs that they will carry to Springfield.

"Each site has had its own interpretation of what this means," said Sarah Castle, group coordinator for the southern portion of "Freedom Quest '09."

"We're trying to take something from each place with us, so everyone is represented," she said. "We're having everyone sign a flag, so that we are symbolically taking every individual, even if only by signature."

Once everyone had congregated on the parking lot, people moved to form the characters "FQ09" for an aerial photograph to show the solidarity behind their message. Moved by the significance of the occasion for every individual present, people chanted "Freedom" in unison in response to the question, "What do you want?"

Alton Mayor Tom Hoechst spoke passionately to the crowd about the importance of finding opportunities to develop relationships.

A participant in the rally led the singing of "We Are the Champions." As the song progressed, their voices became stronger, with a few guests visibly tearing from the emotional context.

Debbie Goodman of IMPACT then invited attendees to share their personal stories with the crowd. People touchingly emphasized how important it is to them to be able to live on their own and to move about the community as they wish.

Jenny O'Malley summed up the other speakers' feelings when she said, "I have one thing to say to you - never

give up."

"Most of these kids have cognitive disabilities," said IMPACT staff member Rhonda Bargiel. "They have really benefited from becoming an active part of the community. We've allowed a stigma to develop that they're not capable, and in many cases, it's just not true."

To further the disabled community's desire for integration and independence, Freedom Quest encourages people with developmental disabilities to self-advocate for change.

"We have three messages that are all centered on creating a more people-oriented system," Castle said. "We want to decrease the dependency on institutions, decrease the number of people currently waiting for services and increase the community support that people receive."

According to the Human Services Resource Institute, nearly 17,000 Illinois residents are on a state waiting list for services and support relating to their disabilities.

"Illinois ranks 51st in states (including the District of Columbia) in providing community-integrated support," Castle said. "That's terrible. We can work towards being better than worst by calling for change and by finding a voice to advocate for ourselves."

The three caravans from the different regions of the state will convene in Springfield at the Capitol Building's Rotunda at 11 a.m. today.

To underscore their message, the riders will present legislators with more than 17,000 pennies to represent each disabled person on the list waiting for services.

"We're looking for an open forum for communication between the disabled, the legislators and the service providers," Castle said.

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Some of the several dozen people who attended a rally called Freedom Quest '09 dance and hold signs Wednesday at IMPACT Inc., 2735 E. Broadway in Alton. The rally was in advance of a rally to be held today at the Illinois State Capitol to draw attention to the need for services for the developmentally disabled.