

Walk stresses the ability, rights of the disabled

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More than 50 people gathered outside city hall Friday to celebrate their abilities and rights as citizens.

Carrying placards with messages like "I dream about college too," "Self-advocacy is having courage," "Self-advocacy is being included" and "We have a right to have a family," they came for the first ever Self-Advocacy Walk and Roll for Fun hosted by the Southern Alberta Individualized Planning Association or SAIPA.

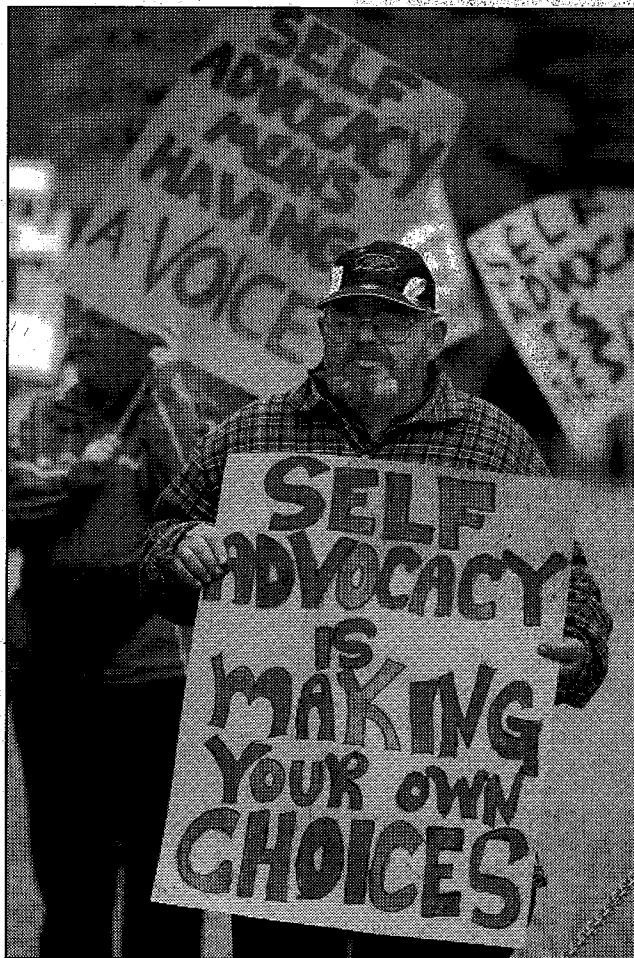
"We're here to make awareness in the community that we can be just people first without our disabilities," said Lana Rutledge, who has been a self-advocate since 2002. "The people out in the community should look at the person first and the disability after."

Rutledge attends a resource centre almost five days a week, volunteers with a senior citizens' organization and school libraries and serves on the board of the South Region Self-Advocacy Network.

"The community doesn't realize the abilities that we have because from what I can see, some people look at us that we don't do anything because we receive (Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped) but we still volunteer and give back to the community," she said.

Edmund Zaiser also came to the rally to let people know about self-advocacy and what it means.

"We are capable of doing stuff like having a job and getting involved in the



Herald photo by David Rossiter

A.J. Joss holds his placard while taking part in a Self-Advocacy Walk and Roll for Fun awareness event Friday as the group walked from city hall to Galt Gardens.

community," he said. SAIPA works to help people with

developmental disabilities grow as valued and participating members of their community. Self-advocacy is about teaching people with disabilities to champion and support themselves and others.

"Ultimately we are all Canadians and citizens and we have the same rights and responsibilities. Our message to the community today is just that," said Heather Wiebe, advocacy co-ordinator with SAIPA.

Before the walk from city hall to Galt Gardens, several guest speakers addressed the crowd. Ald. Rajko Dodic brought greetings from the city and told the crowd they were right to focus on ability.

"Those with a disability are those who don't recognize you for who you are," he said.

Lethbridge East MLA Bridget Pastoor encouraged those in the crowd to keep on advocating even though it will be a struggle.

"Some of the funding you're receiving isn't keeping up with the cost of living," she said, "Don't give up, stick together and talk to your MLAs."

Part of SAIPA is the South Region Self-Advocacy Network, a group of about 80 people with and without disabilities who come together to discuss issues, create positive change in the community and connect with others. About 25 of them will be heading to Edmonton in October for the Self-Advocacy Summit 2009. The two-day gathering brings people with developmental disabilities together from across the province for workshops, speakers, to share best practices and network.