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Exhibit will teach about handicaps

Have you ever walked with leg braces, played Monopoly in braille, or used a hearing aid? Have you ever imagined what it's like to be mentally retarded or emotionally disturbed?

Next month, Thornes Marketplace at 150 Main St. will host a traveling exhibit that allows non-disabled people to learn about handicaps and examine their attitudes about the disabled.

The show, "humanizes, educates and doesn't threaten," said Stephen Calcagnino of 35 Columbus Ave., a member of the Handicapped Services Committee which organized the project. "It breaks down a lot of people's fears."

In Calcagnino's opinion, the "government was shortsighted in educating the public to the impact of" laws governing the civil rights of the handicapped in education, employment and accessibility to buildings and programs. This exhibit provides that education, he said.

"What if You Couldn't...?" was developed by the Boston Children's Museum and financed by the National Endowment for the Arts. It was first installed in 1976 and the traveling version has been touring the country for two years.

The show will run April 15 to May 15 on the third floor of Thornes and will be open weekdays, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. (Thursday to 9 p.m.), and Saturday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Guided tours for school and special interest groups are available.

"What if You Couldn't...?" is divided into six areas: visual impairment, auditory impairment, physical handicaps, learning disabilities, emotional disturbance and mental retardation. Each area simulates a disability and shows corrective measures.

For instance, visitors can ride a wheelchair on various surfaces, walk through a maze with a blindfold and cane, and perform eye-hand coordination and memory tasks. Stories written by the disabled and informational graphics are also provided.

The city's Handicapped Services Committee already has raised the needed \$2,500 through donations and a grant from the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission. A pancake breakfast held in Pulaski Park last fall raised over \$1,000.

Workers from Riverside Industries Inc., a non-profit vocational training program for mentally retarded people in Easthampton, will install the 1,500-square-foot exhibit, said Calcagnino. And guides from Smith College, Clarke School for the Deaf, and the community now are being trained.

Accompanying the exhibit will be performing arts, a photography exhibit and an art show featuring prints, drawings and sculptures by the handicapped.

Area social service organizations and businesses will set up tables at which disabled people can leave resumes for possible employment.