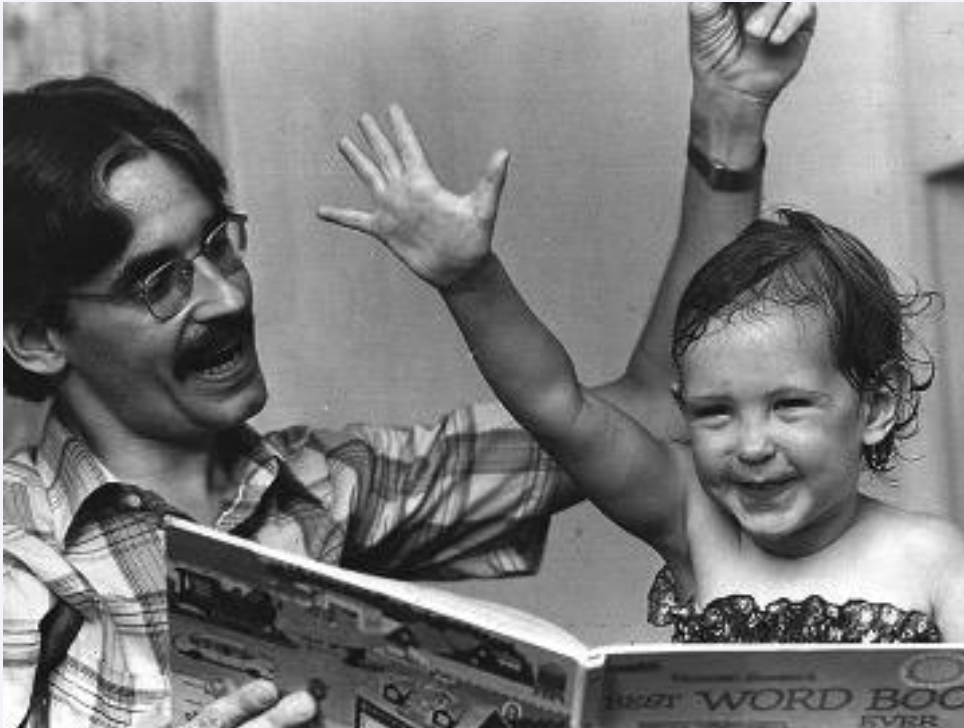


A Chance to Grow began with a little girl and a dream

March 10, 2020 at 12:31 am



The recent death of special education and charter school pioneer Bob DeBoer brings back memories of when far fewer educational opportunities existed for children. DeBoer's own experience as a child with polio, and then as the parent of a child with disabilities, were factors in the nonprofit's start.

The Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities has worked to research and preserve Minnesota's disability history. This *Star Tribune* article is from July 22, 1982. Here is an excerpt:

To Bob DeBoer, making his daughter Jesse, who has a brain injury, "neurologically normal" is a relatively simple matter. "It's not miracles," he says. "It's a lot of hard work and understanding how the brain works."

Jesse, age 2 ½, isn't so analytical. One look from her dad brings an insuppressible, coy grin to her face – a grin that says their partnership is all it will take.

With a mouth full of cookies, Jesse looks like any kid her age. And in some ways, she is. She disappears from the room, laughs, whimpers, and says “no” a lot.

But there are important differences. She walks with a heavy, dragged-out motion, hunched forward, and wears corrective shoes. Her longest sentences consist of two words. She cannot focus on objects close to her.

Those are symptoms of the oxygen deprivation that Jessie experienced during her birth by Caesarean section. Seizures followed, and she was placed in intensive care for two weeks. For the first three months of her life, she was given barbiturates to prevent more seizures.

Jesse’s parents Bob and Kathy DeBoer did all they could to help their daughter. But the lack of educational resources for children with brain injuries was a concern. [A Chance to Grow](#)’s history states that “They took advantage of all the best traditional services and met many friendly and supportive therapists the first few years of her life, but found themselves continuously waiting to see their daughter improve.”

The DeBoers immersed themselves in research. One of the people they found was physical therapist and pioneer Art Sandler. Sandler took a neuro-physiological approach when he assessed vision, auditory, kinesthetic and motor functions, as well as reflexes, nutrition and allergies. The DeBoers attended one of his day-long lectures and were inspired by his explanation of why the brain develops through movement.

His program was implemented for Jesse and the family soon saw progress. “Finally, they felt hope,” [A Chance to Grow](#)’s history stated.

Volunteers stepped in to help as the family implemented Sandler’s’ program into their home. “Within a few years, Jesse began to walk with ease as her balance improved, stand up straight and even speak. She had transformed into a charming little girl, making it difficult for the volunteers to say goodbye. At that point, her parents made a lifetime vow to give back the gift of Sandler’s program to other families, hoping it would allow more children like Jesse to reach their highest potential,” the history stated.

Jesse is now an adult but the program her parents founded in 1983 lives on.

The History Note is a monthly column sponsored by the Minnesota Governor’s Council on Developmental Disabilities, www.mnddc.org and www.partnersinpolicymaking.com.