

Access Press

Volume 19, Number 4

Minnesota's Disability



Community Newspaper

April 10, 2008

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History Note

Rufus Alexander

by Luther Granquist

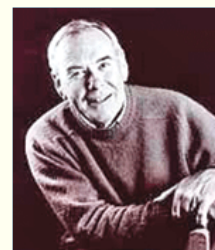
In his short story, *Rufus at the Door*, Jon Hassler, the Minnesota writer who died last month, described a common event of the 1940s, a high school field trip to a Minnesota state hospital. Hassler told this story from the point of view of a boy shocked by what he saw as the teacher led them through the wards pointing out the "morons," "imbeciles," and "idiots." Before the class could go to lunch, the teacher required them to name a "moron" in their own home town.

The boy knew it was Rufus Alexander. Rufus's elderly mother would bring him downtown on Saturday afternoons and leave him at the grocery store the boy's dad ran. Rufus did not talk, just stood at the door grinning as if he was very content. But, the boy and his dad doubted Rufus felt much or understood anything.

Hassler told how the boy learned otherwise. Rufus's mother died, and his brothers had him committed to the state hospital. A year or so later, the boy saw him on another field trip to the state hospital. Rufus looked older and had no smile. Their eyes met as Rufus stood at the door to watch the class leave. The boy grasped that Rufus recognized him, knew where he was from, and yearned to leave with him. In ten short pages, Hassler captured the attitudes and beliefs of the time and showed that those attitudes and beliefs could change. ■

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

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John Hassler, author of "Rufus at the Door"

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