

Three women who did their part for children

by [Luther Granquist](#) // April 8th, 2011



Today, agencies provide most of the community-based services for persons with disabilities, generally supported by public funds. In the decades after the School for the Feebleminded opened at Faribault, however, three women, on their own and without public support, established the first group homes and day programs for persons with developmental disabilities.

In 1897, Laura Baker, the lead teacher at the School for the Feebleminded at Faribault, left there to start the School for Nervous and Backward Children in Minneapolis. Faribault Superintendent Arthur C. Rogers reported that Baker “carried out a long-cherished plan” and that the crowded condition of the state school suggested “the need of a place in the state where people financially able could secure for pay special privileges for their afflicted children.” After a year she moved the school to Northfield and called it the Laura Baker School.

Alvina Hammer, a nurse employed at Faribault, resigned her position in 1923 to open a home in south Minneapolis for four children. She did so at a time when Guy Hanna, the Superintendent at Faribault, published his diatribe, *The Menace of the Feebleminded*, and the Hennepin County Child Welfare Board distributed a pamphlet that proclaimed that “feebleminded” persons were “a causative factor in the production of crime, pauperism, prostitution and other social diseases.” For the next 40 years she directed the expansion of what is now Hammer Residences.

Despite the depression, Louise Whitbeck Fraser, a teacher, started a school in her home in Minneapolis in 1935. After encounters with NIMBY neighbors and a university skeptic who called her a fraud, she finally located her Home Study School in a building on Penn Avenue that previously was used as a machine shop. This day program, the first of its kind in Minnesota, was renamed the Fraser School in 1965.

In 1936, Mildred Thomson, who for years filled the role of state guardian and was an ardent supporter of the institutions, went to a picnic at the Home Study School. Later she wrote that it was a new idea to her that these “lower grade children” living at home could respond to and enjoy group activities, but that at the time she had no idea how to implement this realization. She had a “nagging feeling” that more could be done for these children than offer them institutional space. But Laura Baker, Alvina Hammer, and Louise Whitbeck Fraser had had the vision and had already demonstrated the will and the ability to serve these children outside of the state’s institutions.

Would you like to make history? Access Press is interested in reader submissions for the monthly History Note column, to complement the articles written by Luther Granquist and other contributors.

Submissions must center on events, people and places in the history of Minnesota's disability community. We are interested in history that focuses on all types of physical and cognitive disabilities, so long as the history has a tie to Minnesota. We are especially interested in stories from Greater Minnesota.

Please submit ideas prior to submitting full stories, as we may have covered the topic before. Past History Note articles can be found on www.accesspress.org Contact us at access@accesspress.org or 651-644-2133 if you have questions.

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