

HISTORY NOTE: ‘CHANGES’ gives a look back at long-ago behavior modification

by [Access Press Staff](#) // April 10th, 2018

Fifty years ago, Travis Thompson’s documentary CHANGES focused on behavior modification at Faribault State School and Hospital. Food, possibly M & M candies, was used in teaching. Thompson is a licensed psychologist and professor in educational psychology at the University of Minnesota.

The black and white 1968 film opens with organ music, played by one of the facility’s 1,800 residents. Hands carefully spell out C-H-A-N-G-E-S. Heartbreaking scenes of withdrawn and agitated residents soon are replaced by depictions of positive behavioral reinforcement, and kindly interactions between residents and staff.

The film’s narrator was the late Dave Moore, longtime anchor at WCCO-TV. A film clip on the Minnesota Governor’s Council on Developmental Disabilities (MNCDD) website is striking, as is the script. The sounds of residents screaming are replaced with residents singing.

Anyone watching CHANGES should be aware that dated words are used. While no one would use such language today, the film is pioneering for its time. People with disabilities are portrayed as having capabilities and not solely as objects of pity.

In one part of the film, Faribault Program Director Eric Errickson said “We’ve got a lot of folks here who don’t need to be here. And institutions themselves have taught them some very bad habits about living in groups. Suppose one of the things we’re doing now is aiding the resident in unlearning some of these bad kinds of things that we’ve taught him before. I think that’s one of the choices the state of Minnesota makes if it’s gonna create large institutions and make them warehouses for people, then you get folks who learn that kind of behavior.”

“Behavior modification works,” Moore said. “Profoundly retarded patients can be taught self-care. And they can rejoin the human family.”

In an interview posted by MNCCD, Thompson recalled being asked to help deal with Faribault residents who had behavioral challenges. Staff was vague during Thompson’s first visit. He learned they were afraid he’d be scared off by issues residents faced.

His first visit was to Dakota Building, where 67 men with severe cognitive disabilities lived. Thompson described the fear and shock he felt when seeing the men. Some milled around. Others sat in chairs, rocked, flapped their hands, screamed and shouted. He was especially shocked by one man who kept banging his head against a wall.

Thompson toured other buildings and told administrators he needed time to think. “I remember thinking that I never wanted to go back to Faribault and witness the nightmare I had seen that day. Intermixed with that sense of revulsion was the realization that if I walked away, it was

likely nothing would change for the men, women, and children at Faribault.” He developed behavioral intervention programs for the residents. Graduate students joined in. Soon behaviors were changing for the better, with decreases in violent behavior and use of seclusion.

Next month is the story of the documentary’s impacts.

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 disability topics, 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. 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.