

HISTORY NOTE: Candles provided employment, homage to a legacy



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Dennis Acker

A recently unveiled history project reminds us that great tragedies can bring about small and unexpected ways to honor a legacy and help others. President John F. Kennedy's great concern for people with disabilities is well-known. Out of the Kennedy family's experience with a sister with disabilities came the Special Olympics, Very Special Arts and disability-focused legislation.

When Kennedy outlined his "New Frontier" vision for the United States, he said, "We are not here to curse the darkness, but to light a candle that can guide us through the darkness to a safe and sure future. For the world is changing. The old era is ending. The old ways will not do."

After he was assassinated in November 1963, Kennedy was memorialized in many ways. One tribute, meant to provide work and raise money for people with developmental disabilities, was the production and sale of the John F. Kennedy Flame of Hope molded candles. During the 1960s and early 1970s the candles were manufactured at 12 sheltered workshops around the United States, including Opportunity Workshop in Richfield (now Opportunity Partners).

A search of newspaper archives shows that community service groups sold the candles around the country. A *Bemidji Pioneer* article describes how the Mrs. Jaycees group there was selling candles as a fundraiser in 1971, to pay candlemakers and to support Camp Friendship. "The objective of the Flame of Hope program is to demonstrate to the American public that many of this country's (disabled) men and women can be employed and trained and given the opportunity to work," the article stated.

A May 2003 *Hartford Courant* obituary describes how Connecticut resident Daniel O’Leary traveled the United States, teaching workers how to make the molded candles. O’Leary would go to work for greater community inclusion.

A well-known and widely published 1968 United Press International photo shows the late president’s mother, Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy, admiring candles in a Boston area shop.

The candles were of different designs and colors, with the tapers having a star at the base. Many sets were sold with matching matches or glass holders. An April 1966 Minneapolis *Star* photo was captioned “Candlemaker – Trimming surplus wax from a candle was Dennis Acker, who works for the Opportunity Workshop. The workshop is one of 12 sheltered workshops in the country selected to manufacture the John F. Kennedy ‘Flame of Hope’ candle. Present plans call for utilizing 10 workers with developmental disabilities in the project and producing 540 pairs of candles each week. The candles will go on sale the week of May 23 in selected area stores.”

Another photo showed Muriel Humphrey, wife of then-Vice President Hubert Humphrey, touring the \$165,000 expansion project and viewing the candles in November 1967.

The Kennedy candles still show up from time to time on online auction sites, selling for as much as \$50. The Minnesota Governor’s Council on Developmental Disabilities is researching and sharing historic photos of people with disabilities, which provided the impetus for this story.

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.

