

HISTORY NOTE: Documentary influenced work on behavior modification

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

The documentary CHANGES, which marks its 50-year anniversary in 2018, not only gave a view on the little-seen institutional life, it showed how behavior modification made a positive difference for residents at Faribault State Hospital.

Those who championed behavior modification also inspired others who saw such techniques as helping people with developmental disabilities.

The Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities recently posted a link to CHANGES, and to a 2006 interview with Travis Thompson, a licensed psychologist, and professor in educational psychology at the University of Minnesota. Thompson was shocked at the sad state of affairs at Faribault, in 1968. He developed behavioral intervention programs for the residents.

The film, which the group struggled to fund, drew the attention of investigative journalist Al Austin. Austin for many years led the award-winning I-Team investigative unit at WCCO-TV in Minneapolis. He later produced documentaries for PBS. Austin died of cancer in April at age 83.

“Al Austin, then a reporter for WCCO television, heard about the film and asked to see it. Al was notorious for his deadpan countenance, but he was clearly moved when he saw the film,” said Thompson. “He and a WCCO film crew spent a day at Faribault shooting new professional footage he could use on air, and he did a lengthy report about Faribault State Hospital into which he spliced footage from our film. People at the CBS network evening news in New York apparently received a feed of the film and used a segment of our film for the lead in on Walter Cronkite's evening news several days later.”

Thompson recalled: “In the months and years after the film had been created we continued to make strides at Faribault, then fed in part by the strange collection of staff from Faribault, my grad students and (post-doctoral students) who met at my home in south Minneapolis every Wednesday evening to read relevant journal articles and discuss how they applied to our work at Faribault. We called it a Seminary because it was half seminar and half drinking beer and eating potato chips while we enthusiastically explored our next steps at Faribault. I have never known such a dedicated and enthusiastic group of people with great mutual respect for one another and a shared vision of science-based reform.”

Thompson recalled the roles of Faribault administrators Roger Johnson and Eric Errickson. “They had initiated the changes at Faribault while other people with less character would have sat on their hands or gone fishing. The new administration at Faribault was unsympathetic with our efforts and after several months terminated our contracts and sent us packing. But the film ‘Changes’ still exists that documents our earliest efforts to improve the lives of people who had been largely forgotten and who had no future.” The film and books published about the work

“provide lasting evidence that good things can happen to improve the lives of people with developmental disabilities, even under daunting and dispiriting circumstances.”

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.