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Boy, therapist still inspire each other

by Luther Granquist

Marilyn Blom of Grass Valley, Calif. and Richard Brown of St. Louis Park have two things in common. They both participate in programs for artists with developmental disabilities. Blom, a retired occupational therapist, works one day a week as an art instructor at Neighborhood Center of the Arts in Grass Valley, www.nccn.net/~nca/index.htm. Brown is an accomplished artist at Partnership Resources in St. Louis Park. Both of them also once lived at Faribault State Hospital, where Brown was a resident from 1951 to 1970. Blom was an occupational therapist there from 1959 to 1962 and lived in the employees' building. They shared memories of those days late this summer when Blom visited with Brown at Partnership Resources.

By September 1959, Richard Brown, a 13-year-old-boy with cerebral palsy, had spent the last eight years of his life lying in a crib or crawling on the floor in Pine Building at Faribault. People had a very difficult time understanding his speech, but the nurses, one in particular, found him to be an engaging youngster who interacted with them with sounds and arm and head movements. Blom came to work at Faribault in August 1959 to fulfill a condition of the stipend program which supported her in the occupational therapy program at the University of Minnesota. She outlined for the Faribault staff the work that she could do for residents there. The nurses in Pine recommended that she include Dickie, as they called Brown. Blom started to work with him and seven other Faribault residents on October 5, 1959.

The nurses used a reclining wheelchair to bring Brown to see Blom in the visitors' room in Pine. Blom tried to position him upright, but he could not maintain a sitting position. Blom's training had included nothing about working with persons with cerebral palsy, but she devised a seating harness to support Brown so he could sit up. Even with the harness, he could only initially sit up for five or ten minutes before he tired. After she worked with him several times a week for three months, Brown could sit for half an hour, after six months for an hour. By October 1960, he could sit for two hours with little or no fatigue.

Brown's life had changed. Starting in January 1961 he got the "working boys diet" instead of the "infirmary diet"—food he had to chew and not just swallow. He attended recreational and church services when his building was not on quarantine for hepatitis, as it was from December 1960 until March 1961. Blom and her colleague, Orville Berg, an occupational therapist who joined the

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Faribault staff in April 1961, saw how quickly he learned. They made him a mouth stick and set up an old manual typewriter so he could practice typing and learn where the letters were. Early in 1962, James Geary, the director of the Division of Special Education in the Minnesota Department of Education learned about Blom's work with Brown. Geary

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Richard Brown



This summer, Richard Brown and Marilyn Blom got the opportunity to spend some time and get reacquainted after years of only an occasional note.

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prompted the Department of Public Welfare and Faribault staff to investigate whether he could attend the newly opened Worthington Crippled Child-ren's School.

Faribault had a school program at that time for about 200 of the 3,200 residents. In order to support a possible application to the Worthington school, the teacher for deaf students at Faribault worked on sign language with him for 11 half-hour sessions in the

“Blom did not forget Richard Brown . . . her earlier experiences with Brown were what kept her working in the field.”

spring of 1962. Brown learned to recognize more than 30 signs, but could not physically make them. Another teacher, who worked with him on reading readiness for five half-hour sessions, concluded that Brown could learn to read with intensive, individual instruction. Nevertheless, Brown's "home" school district, the Minneapolis Public Schools, refused to pay for the Worth-ington program because there was a similar program at Dowling School. Inexplicably, in July 1962, a state hospital psychologist recommended that Brown's school program be discontinued.

Blom wanted to move to California after she graduated from the University of Minnesota. She moved there in 1962 to work in a school for children with disabilities. She had shown that Brown could sit up with appropriate support. She also showed that Brown could learn. After she left, Brown sent her his picture, but he was lying down on a wheelchair outside one of the Faribault buildings. In 1965, the school department at Faribault scheduled him to receive "home-bound" instruction for half an hour two or three times a week in Linden Building, where he lived at that time. In February 1966 the "homebound" teacher moved out of state and Brown's educational program at Faribault ended. Brown was discharged to Trevilla of Robbinsdale in August 1970. He came there lying down in a wheelchair.

Blom did not forget Richard Brown. She visited him at Trevilla shortly after he was discharged from Faribault. Some years later, after Brown moved from Trevilla to a waiver services site, he had one of his staff persons call her to report that he had met a mutual friend from Faribault in Arizona. Blom said that Brown's call brightened one of those days that had not been going well at all. This past summer, Blom brightened Brown's day when he learned she would be visiting him. She was, he said, someone who had listened to him and talked with him at Faribault. Blom said that her early experiences with Brown were what kept her working in the field.

On the morning they met at Partnership Resources, Brown, who has been up and about every day for years using a power wheelchair, used his augmentative communication device to thank Blom for what she did for him. He showed her pictures he had painted. Blom mentioned again how much of an impression Brown had made on her at the beginning of her career. Art is one interest they have long shared. Their mutual respect, admiration and love of humanity is more they have in common.

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