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TALK BY MISS MILDRED THOMSON
at the meeting of the Rice County Association for Retarded Children
Jefferson Elementary School, Faribault
April 6, 1959

On my desk today is Dr. Berglund's letter which some of you have received. In this letter, for which I thank you, the use of the word "veteran" tended to shape what I have to say to you tonight. I have been here 35 years, and that means that I am a veteran in years.

We have many young veterans, so a veteran is not necessarily a person who has been some place for a long time. Rather, a veteran is one who has worked for something; who has, in many ways, fought for something. Then the question comes: have they won?

I think those of us who have worked for the mentally retarded over a long period of time now feel that we were acting as advance guards to go out and hold the line until another force--a larger force, a dominant force--could come to back us up. And so, in that way, I think that all of us who worked for the mentally retarded over the years prior to 1950--or 1945, shall we say--were holding the line until the time came, until the minute of history had been reached, when the parents themselves came up as a rear guard to take command--to back up those of us who had been in the front ranks. Because that is what has been done.

Working for the mentally retarded is an entirely different thing today from what it was 15, 20, 30 years ago--very, very different. And the organization of parents is the thing, chiefly, that has made it so different.

There are some of you here tonight who are parents of children who are 15 to 20 years old or older, and you know what I am talking about. The parents of young children probably do not. They have had their experience when they had someone to turn to; when you other parents, as well as the professional people, were ready to help them. But you, the older parents, know what it was to have a child who was retarded, and to have no place to turn, no one who seemed to be able to understand, no one who seemed too interested, no one who seemed to be really able to help you except, perhaps, when possible, the institution. That was about all that we had to

offer for the child who could not become self-supporting.

Now, over a period of a good many years, there have been classes in the public schools for the so-called "educable child," for the child who, it was hoped, would become self-supporting, and who could profit from education. However, many, or perhaps most of you that are here tonight have children who are not going to be self-supporting, that are never going to be independent of you or someone who stands in your place in working or planning for them. They are always going to have to have someone to stand back of them. And as I say, outside of offering institutional care, when that was possible, there was nothing to offer these children. What has happened?

You organized. You came out and said, "Now we are going to see that something is done for our children. And when you did that, things changed. But let's go back a bit to the time before that happened. Let's go back, in Minnesota, particularly, and just a little bit in the country as a whole.

This institution at Faribault is among the older institutions. Those of you who live in Rice County can very definitely feel proud that it has been here. And yet I doubt that up until recently you have taken a possessive interest and called it your institution. In fact, as late as 1945 when the legislature was meeting and was considering taking over Owatonna for the mentally retarded, the people of Owatonna protested. They did not want an institution to serve the mentally retarded in their community. They would rather have an institution to serve children who were not retarded.

And so there was that question--there are a group of people that we don't talk about so much; parents don't talk about it to their friends. In fact, I should think many husbands and wives didn't talk quite frankly to one another. The doctors didn't know quite what to say to you; doctors were not too much help. Psychologists did not have the knowledge that they have now. In answer to the question of what was to be done--if a child was found to be retarded, there wasn't very much.

There was absolutely nothing written, other than books for professional people. About 1943, when we thought about and began writing this booklet, "Teach Me," we didn't have a parent in the

group that was meeting together. Oh no, at that time we would not have thought of asking a parent to come to a meeting where there was going to be some discussion of what could be done for our retarded. People knew so little that they were afraid that they might hurt the feelings of parents. And parents were so afraid that they would say the wrong thing that they didn't even want to participate.

But this booklet was written by a group that included public health nurses, the people from the institution, psychologists and social workers, and teachers. They met together because there was not one single thing in the United States that I had ever heard of, or that any parent or professional person that I knew of had ever heard of, that would give parents the least bit of help in how to care for their child at home.

When this booklet came out in 1945 or '46, it was the first of its kind published. It was not only the first in Minnesota, it was the first in the United States. We sent a few copies of the booklet to people who were interested in the mentally retarded, just as a matter of interest, and what happened? Immediately, requests came from institutions; they wanted to give this booklet to parents. People were saying, "There is nothing--absolutely nothing--to help parents do anything for their children." Now this is a very simple booklet, and it's hard to realize that only 15 years ago there wasn't even that much that had been done in the United States to help people know how to take care of their retarded children.

No parent had ever written a story such as Pearl Buck, who was one of the very first to write about her child. But prior to that, parents didn't write, they didn't talk, and nobody did give any very great amount of help. When that booklet came out for Minnesota parents, we began getting requests and sold it outside of the state. You may be interested in knowing that the number of copies that have now been sold has reached about 100,000. It's been about 15 years now since it was published, but still orders are coming although many other things have been written.

There was one parent in one of the countries of South America who wrote in, sending five dollars, saying that he had heard of our booklet. Please send it to him, he wrote, no matter what it cost,

and if he were sending too much money, just keep it and give it to some other parent. It was the only thing he had ever heard of. People from India, from England, from other South American countries, from Canada, wanted it. There had been nothing, just nothing.

Incidentally, one of the countries of South America--I believe it was Colombia--used "You Are Not Alone", which came later, as a guide, and has written, in Spanish, for their parents, something quite similar, though giving a little more information on institutions.

"Teach Me" was one of the first helps written. Its wide use makes you realize what your own organization has meant. It is hard to realize that there was so little material available not so long ago.

Well now, let's go back a little further. Who was it that was interested in these children? As I said, Faribault is one of the oldest institutions--I am not sure of the exact date, but I think that it was some place around 1872 or '73, that arrangements were made for retarded children to be placed in Faribault along with the deaf and blind children that were here. Until 1905, the deaf and the blind and the mentally deficient--the three groups--were more or less a part of the same general institution. Then in 1905 a definitely separate institution was built.

Dr. Rogers, of whom most of you, I am sure, have heard, was superintendent here for many, many years. He was one of the superintendents who felt that he needed to talk with other superintendents. Now remember, at that time the only place where classes in the schools or special methods of teaching was considered was within an institution. There were no classes in public schools; there had been no thought that there should be classes in public schools. Even as late as 1905 there were no psychologists. I think I would be right in saying that there were practically no tests, that one didn't think of tests as a means of finding out what a person was capable of doing. And so it was just a sort of guess work. The reason that people got into the institution and remained there was because of unusual behavior. With tests being used today, they may test up above the level that we consider mentally deficient, but they were institutionalized just because there were no tests. A more or less

subjective determination was used. If a person had had an opportunity to learn, had had an opportunity to be a part of a community, and had been unable to make the grade, we said that he just couldn't succeed. He was retarded. Because of such problems, Dr. Rogers felt the need to talk to other superintendents.

Now most of the superintendents in that day, as today, were doctors, physicians, and there were very few, if any, other professions that were particularly interested. Social work hadn't come into existence at all. Social work is a very new profession. So the superintendents 80 years ago, of the institutions that were then in existence over the country, decided that they must get together and discuss their problems in order that they might do a better job in taking care of the patients that they had. That is the beginning of the American Association on Mental Deficiency, of which I am sure all of you have heard, and of which many of you are members. They were the professional group that held the line as did the people working in the states until the parents were ready to back them up so that the progress could be faster and better.

If you could read some of the old Journals of the American Association on Mental Deficiency you would know of the intense interest on the part of the superintendents in finding the best way to work with the retarded children and in finding out what could be done. Must the children, when they came to the institution, remain there for life? Was there anything available for them outside of the institution? At first it was felt there was not, that if they came to an institution they had come to remain for life. Old Dr. Rogers, who was an outstanding person, had the feeling very definitely that a retarded person who came to an institution came in because he did not fit into his home, nor was there a place for him in the community. Now that he had come to the institution, it must be made into a happy home for him, because that was where he was going to spend the rest of his life. That was the attitude; that was all that parents could see. If they had not been able to take care of that child, if they had come to the place where they had to have institutional care, then it was for life. And further-

more it was better for them to break the ties somewhat. After all, there were the other children in the home to consider, there should be other children in the family, and those children were the ones that must have their parent's attention.

So the ties were broken in many places--consciously broken. That was the very early philosophy. Well, gradually that has changed. We got public education in the schools, and then came the philosophy that those children who could become independent, who could learn to be self-supporting, should have training and return to the communities and support themselves. For those who were not going to be self-supporting, there was very little done.

In Minnesota in 1917 there was a concept that, I think, differs from that of any other place in the country to some extent. There was a recognition that retarded persons, even those who were brighter and were self-supporting, could never be absolutely independent. Even the brighter retarded person must have someone whom he can go to for guidance, who can steer him onto the right road when the going gets tough, someone who can interpret some of his lack of understanding at times to an employer, so that he will be able to keep on the job. Those who are in the trainable group, or the total care group, are always going to need someone to definitely provide for them.

Until 1917 there was not a law in Minnesota to protect children. The state accepted responsibility only for the people who needed special help and who had to be placed in an institution. The Board of Control was a state agency and it had the responsibility for a number of institutions, but the local communities looked after everything else. What the local community could do was limited, so the local community didn't do much, and children were not properly cared for.

There were children found in Minneapolis whose parents had placed them somewhere to board because they wanted to put them out of the home. Somebody said, "I will take them if you pay me some money," and then the children were very badly treated. There were some very terrible situations found. There was nothing that could be done. The parents had put them there, and the parents' rights

had to be considered. Finally the legislature was asked to investigate to see if there could not be laws for the protection of children.

The governor appointed a commission--a very fine commission that had a very excellent executor. Investigations were made, and 30-odd laws were drawn up for the protection of children. Four of those laws applied to the mentally retarded as well as to other children. One law stated that the Board of Control might accept guardianship for dependent and neglected children as well as for retarded children. This had never been possible before. Another law stated that there should be a child welfare board in every county to be appointed by the Board of Control which would have the responsibility, under the direction of the Board, of carrying out the laws pertaining to children.

The Board of Control would have general responsibility for the welfare of the defective, illegitimate, dependent, neglected, delinquent children. It was to cooperate with every other agency that was working for the welfare of these children and to take the initiative when nobody else did. It was not worded quite like that but it was as broad as that--general welfare applied to all retarded children.

The guardianship law applied to adults as well as children, and provided for commitment to the guardianship of the Board of Control, now the Commissioner of Public Welfare. I am not going into an explanation of the guardianship law because most of you have discussed it. You have read the booklet "Looking Ahead", which I see here, and you have discussed it, perhaps, with your welfare board. But the thing is this: this guardianship law was different from the guardianship law for the dependents and neglected. That was a guardianship because the parent was an incompetent parent--or there was no parent. The guardianship law for the mentally retarded was based on the fact that the individual would never be able to be independent of someone. Therefore, the state feels that it can offer to the parent a sort of dual responsibility so long as the parent is able to take care of the child, and then be ready to step in and take the parent's place when that is needed.

Now of course that law also applies to persons who are problems

in the community. Not all the mentally retarded come from parents such as you who are in this room. There are mentally retarded parents with mentally retarded children--two or three generations of them--with children who present many problems. In the early years, parents like you were not thought of as in need of help from the state. That was one of the reasons that you didn't have help. The state felt a responsibility for the indigent family whose children were running wild, and getting into difficulties--stealing and bad sex habits. Some of these children can be taught to be self-supporting. This comprises a very important group. One of the things that makes me very happy is the fact that you as an organization are accepting the responsibility for this group of the retarded.

In St. Paul the parent group has organized a sort of club for the brighter retarded boys and girls that have no homes. They have been in an institution, and their homes have broken up completely, or the home is not one that they can return to, so they are living in boarding homes. The St. Paul parents' group is sponsoring this club for this particular group of retarded, not one of whom is a child of any parent who is a member of the organization. It seems to me that, in doing this, your organization has gotten the objectivity that is needed.

Because of Minnesota's guardianship law, and this general law giving responsibility for the mentally retarded to the Board of Control, our state, since 1917, has had in addition to the institution an overall program for the retarded. There has been, therefore, the possibility of getting community groups together, of getting groups--always with the institution a part of every community group, because the institution is an integral part of any program. There are many children who are going to have to have institutional care if not today, some day. It may not be for life; it may be for a period of training--or it may be for life. It is something that we all want to think of as a facility when it is needed and then when it is not needed and the child can return to the community, it is still there, in the background, to be used when needed.

Another thing that has always given me pleasure about the

parents' group in Minnesota is the fact that you are not breaking up into segments. In certain states the parents who have children in one institution organize for that; and the group whose children are in another institution organize there. Then those parents whose children are not in an institution come in the middle and think, "My child is not in the institution so I am not particularly interested. I'm just interested in community." Now in Minnesota every parent has been interested in a total program, and that, to me, is very wonderful.

Following this law of 1917, and this possibility of having a total program for the mentally retarded, we built up, little by little--and it was little by little, too--very little. When I think that today your organization is on a state level, that it is going to the legislature and insisting that there must be more money for the retarded children, that the parents are going to the legislators and saying, "My child is retarded. My child needs school. My child is in this institution in this building, and I know what I am talking about." I think back to the years when we, who were trying to get more space for the retarded, said over and over and over again, "Oh, if only the legislators could talk to these parents and could know what their problems are!" We thought they would help. And then they did.

Why it happened when it did, I wonder. It's just one of those things--the time was right. All over the country there began to be little groups of parents coming together one way or another. Our organization on mental deficiency that has been in existence for so many years for the professional people was ready to say to the parents from over the country, "Come to our meetings. We'll arrange so that you can get together with one another and talk about what you want to do and what you have done!" That happened two years, in 1949 and in 1950. And then parents said that they wanted to organize on a national basis, and they came to Minneapolis.

The end of September, 1950, was a thrilling time. Parents came from 23 states outside of Minnesota, from 40-odd towns. With the parents in Minnesota, they organized and got ready to begin.

They had no money, they didn't know one another, they had nothing on a local level so they built from the top down to the local level. They got together determined to get recognition for retarded children.

What has happened? Recognition has come. The federal government, never interested before, has special consultants in all of its agencies now--in the Federal Children's Bureau and in the National Institute for Mental Health. The Children's Bureau has just gotten out an excellent booklet for parents. Congress is appropriating money to be spent through its agencies for demonstration and research projects, more money is being appropriated through the National Institute for Mental Health for other types of projects. Millions of dollars are being spent to study and find out more about retardation, but there had been not a penny before you organized. No interest. Nobody writing. And what happens now? Why, the books are coming out by the dozens and the hundreds. There are magazine articles--parents writing to tell other parents. You can get all the information now; you have people to talk to. You know--you are the leaders. We who are in the professional field, who came before you knew how, or were ready to come out and work with us, and who held the line until you could back us up--we have welcomed you.

Next year--not '59, but the fall of '60--you will celebrate in Minneapolis your tenth year of a national organization. I am sure at that time the accomplishments of ten years, over the whole country, and to some extent over the world, as well as in Minnesota, will be added up and you will feel very, very happy that you have been a part of this great movement for your children and our children, because they are a part of the community, and therefore the children of all of us.

I thank you.