

Inspiration

Bob and Kathy DeBoer are the proud co-founders and co-directors of A Chance To Grow, a nonprofit agency that offers educational, therapeutic, and rehabilitative services to disadvantaged children in northeast Minneapolis.

The day of Jesse DeBoer's birth was filled with joy, but also sadness. Elation quickly turned to sorrow when it was learned that she had suffered brain damage during birth. Oxygen deprivation had caused complications and her parents were told that they could only give their beautiful newborn daughter "tender loving care."

Frustrated by the diagnosis, Bob refused to accept that his daughter could not live a normal life, "When I looked into her eyes, I knew there was something there." He immediately started to search for help. Traveling across the United States, Bob, a teacher with a master's degree in human development, met with a number of different physicians, therapists, and vision and auditory specialists. He also studied the most successful interventions in Europe. Finally, after Jesse spent months in and out of therapies, Bob found the answer. Art Sandler and Sandy Brown, physical therapists from Philadelphia, created an intense training program based on the theory that healthy brain cells can learn to compensate for damaged ones. It involved many challenging physical and mental exercises that were designed to improve visual, auditory, and tactile functions.

For three grueling years, Bob, and a group of 60 volunteers, helped Jesse perform activities for up to twelve hours a day. As expected, her progress was slow: "At times," recalls Bob, "the regimen was tedious and draining, and it was hard to watch Jesse struggle, but when she started to walk on her own...it made up for a lot of sacrifice."

Today, Jesse is a happy, mature young woman who is finishing her training as a certified nurse's assistant. Always known for her big heart, Jesse has shown significant empathy for others by volunteering at New Visions Academy (an independent charter school for disadvantaged children), two senior homes, a humane society, and teamed with her mother, Kathy, to start the country's first rescue program for Saint Bernard dogs. Jesse has lived the normal life that her father always knew was possible.

Inspired by Jesse's miraculous spirit, Bob and Kathy established A Chance To Grow (ACTG) to share their effective therapies with other children who face extraordinary challenges. They started lending a hand in 1982. Ten years later, the DeBoers expanded their services by opening New Visions Academy, which uses their successful interventions that enhance readiness skills in young learners.

ACTG's top intervention is the S.M.A.R.T. (Stimulating Maturity through Accelerated Readiness Training) program, a multi-sensory learning approach that stimulates the brain and body in a way that traditional classroom instruction does not. Many of the S.M.A.R.T. activities are based on Sandler and Brown's original exercises. The DeBoers and Lyelle Palmer, PhD, Professor Emeritus of Special Education and former Director of Accelerated Learning at Winona State University, used the latest brain research to develop the program and make it compatible with all academic curriculums. The success of S.M.A.R.T. led to the founding of the Minnesota Learning Resource Center, in 1999, the teacher-training institute of ACTG that hosts workshops and mentors educators in all of the agency's interventions that extend across the state and nation.