Bob DeBoer, who left a legacy of innovation for special needs kids, dies at 73

He and his wife, Kathy DeBoer, launched A Chance to Grow, which offers services such as vision therapy, auditory services and neurofeedback for struggling learners.


Bob DeBoer's daughter suffered a traumatic brain injury when she was born in 1979, and medical professionals offered little hope she would ever walk or talk. Undeterred, he researched physical therapy strategies that spurred brain development, ultimately implementing a program that proved both predictions wrong.

DeBoer devoted the rest of his life to sharing such innovative medical and educational practices to help children with special needs grow in body and mind. He and his wife, Kathy DeBoer, in 1983 launched A Chance to Grow, which offers services such as vision therapy, auditory services and neurofeedback for struggling learners.

A decade later, the DeBoers founded New Visions Academy, now called Athlos Leadership Academy, in Brooklyn Park, one of the first charter schools in Minnesota and the nation. When then-U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Wilson Riley visited Minnesota to research charter schools, he toured New Visions and A Chance to Grow.

“Bob was using pioneering strategies that were pretty much unknown in public education,” said Joe Nathan, director of the Center for School Change and a leader in Minnesota's charter school movement. “Bob had developed techniques to teach some youngsters to read who hadn’t been able to read before, and Riley hadn't seen that.”

In a speech later that year, President Bill Clinton mentioned New Visions as a model for educating struggling readers, and DeBoer was invited to speak before the House Education Committee.

DeBoer, 73, of Maple Lake, Minn., died Feb. 14 of medical complications related to polio.

“He was definitely one of a kind in Minnesota,” said Erica Dickerson, who became executive director of A Chance to Grow when the DeBoers stepped down in 2018. “If Bob saw a need for children, he’d find a way to address it. He was a visionary.”

DeBoer was born in 1947 in Adrian, Minn., the son of Bernice and Gerrit DeBoer. He contracted polio at 18 months and spent much of his childhood hospitalized after enduring 21 surgeries, said his wife, Kathy. The experience gave him insights into what the medical system does right, and wrong, for children with disabilities, she said. Later at Macalester College, he majored in education.

DeBoer worked at what was then called Pillsbury United Neighborhood Services in Minneapolis in the 1980s, where he met his wife, a special-education teacher. The couple went on to launch A Chance to Grow to share what they’d learned working with their daughter, Kathy said.

The Minneapolis nonprofit focused on learning and developmental needs and families by offering services that could help train children's brains to better function for learning and physical movement. It also offered summer school and a child-care center. Over the years it has trained 7,000 educators in Minnesota and beyond on strategies to help children with problems such as ADHD, autism and reading delays, she said.

By 1994, the DeBoers launched New Visions charter school in Minneapolis, which served children with and without special needs. A lover of nature and animals, DeBoer next founded the Jane Goodall Environmental Sciences Academy in Maple Lake, a school offering “experiential learning,” not just in classrooms.
Through the years, DeBoer was a mentor to many and took genuine interest in children and their families, Dickerson said, adding: “He was clearly moved by the struggles of those who are vulnerable and at risk.”

DeBoer is survived by his wife, daughter Jesse, sisters Leslie Giese of Morgantown, N.C., and Marti DeBoer of Chicago. A memorial will be held May 30 at A Chance to Grow.

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