



# *Merril and Dorothy Berg*

## *Fund to Provide Services for Students with Disabilities*

*“Merril Berg doesn’t work by the clock, or even by the calendar, but by the project ... and some projects take more than a year.”*

This is how LeRoy Swenson of Denver, Colorado, regional director of Adult Vocational and Technical Education, described Dr. Berg in 1973 when the United States Office of Education honored Lake Region Junior College (now Lake Region State College) for its outstanding work with the handicapped at a joint Kiwanis-Rotary event. Senator Milton Young was there to add his commendations.

Merril Berg was born on March 14, 1928, at Crosby, North Dakota. He attended school in Crosby, and at sixteen he lied about his age and enlisted in the U.S. Navy. When that tour of duty was up, he enlisted in the Army and later the Air Force. He was one of a select few to serve his country in several different branches of the armed forces. Because of his young age, he was sent to radio school where he studied to become an instructor. Later, when the military recognized a need for psychological care and treatment for its service personnel, Merrill became a counselor. After being discharged from the service in 1953, Merrill continued his education, earning a bachelor degree from Minot State College, a Masters in Education from the University of North Dakota and a Doctorate in

Education from the University of Northern Colorado.

In 1947, Merrill and Dorothy Olson were married, and they had three children—Linda (George) Zeigler, René Berg Mayers, and Pamela Berg. Dorothy worked as a dental assistant. Sadly, Dorothy died on December 5, 1978. In 1985, Merrill married Phyllis Ratcliffe.

Dr. Berg’s concern for the handicapped has a long history ... and it continues today. Recently, when a college supporter established an endowed fund in his honor, Dr. Berg was asked how he would like the income to be used. He asked that it be designated to provide services and equipment for handicapped students attending the college.

Dr. Berg’s involvement with people with problems goes back as far as his youthful Army days when he did remedial tutoring. It continued when he served as a guidance counselor in Mohall and Sherwood, North Dakota, prior to coming to Devils Lake in 1962 to become dean of the college. It continued for the seventeen years he served as dean and president of Lake Region Junior College and is still his concern today as president of Little Hoop Community College at Fort Totten, North Dakota.

The most visible evidence of Dr. Berg’s concern for the handicapped was his request that the new college campus being built in 1965-

1966 be all on one floor and under one roof to allow handicapped students to move freely between the dormitories and classrooms. The local Friends of the Handicapped was a strong supporter for the plan. Wide hallways, doorways, and bathrooms were built to accommodate wheelchairs. Telephones were lowered. Gilliland Hall, the three-story dormitory built in 1973, was specially designed with apartments and rooms to accommodate both single and married students with handicaps. An elevator was installed.

The project required much more than just an accessible physical plant. Working with the State Board for Vocational Education and the State Vocational Rehabilitation Board, students' special needs were provided for, with everything from personal attendants to special equipment. There were tutors and interpreters to help them with their studies. Faculty and students accepted and assisted them.

There were four students with handicaps the first year the program existed. The number peaked in 1971-1972 when there were sixty-seven students, fifteen of whom were confined to wheelchairs. One year, the entire graduating class from the Anne Carlson School in Jamestown enrolled. The number has declined since other schools in the state have sought funds for similar programs. With passage of the Right to Privacy Act, schools can no longer ask student enrollees if they are handicapped. Enrollment records no longer reflect their numbers, but it was estimated that there were about six handicapped students enrolled in 1994-1995 at Lake Region State College.

Dr. Berg was honored when in 1973 he was named Outstanding Employer of the Handicapped in North Dakota by the Governor's

Council on Human Resources. He was also credited with working with the city commission to install ramps on downtown streets. The college had received similar honors in 1969 from the State Junior Chamber of Commerce and in

October 1973 from the State Committee for the Handicapped. Dr. Berg served on both the local and state Committees for the Handicapped.

The accomplishments of his leadership as dean and president of the college are even more important. He came to the college in 1962, when the college was at a crossroads of either building a new campus or going out of existence. The community chose a new campus. All of the buildings on the present campus were built during his tenure.

Dr. Berg, widely known as a true visionary, has a special talent for not only finding new programs, but also for finding grant money to finance those he thinks will serve the people in the community. Through the addition of many new programs and other efforts, the enrollment of the college reached its highest point in 1972 with 612 full-time students. With the leadership of Dr. Berg, assisted by the faculty, the college received its first accreditation by the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools in 1974 and has maintained it ever since.

It's true. Dr. Berg works "by the project." His project is to educate all who might benefit—the traditional student, the non-traditional, and those with handicaps. For him it's a life-time project. ♦

