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Remembering John DuRand

(1934 - 2008)

BY JERR BOSCHEE

It was about three a.m. on a train hurtling through the night somewhere between Kiev and Leningrad. November 1990.

Our friends had seen us off with a flourish. Bear-like Russian hugs, countless toasts, protestations of eternal friendship, and a last-minute bottle of home-brewed vodka slipped into our hands as we boarded the train.

Five of us were in the midst of a two-week fact-finding trip visiting centers for people who were developmentally or intellectually disabled in Moscow, Kiev and Leningrad . . . and there was magic in the Russian night.

John DuRand and I found ourselves alone together in the hallway outside our compartments, both a bit worse for wear from the evening's festivities. We just looked at each other and grinned and shook our heads: How did a couple of hide-bound Minnesotans wind up on the Russian steppes?

We started laughing – and pretty soon we were belting out the University of Minnesota fight song – the Minnesota Rouser – at the top of our lungs!

Magic.

It's impossible for me to be objective about John DuRand. We spent so much time together over the years and shared so much . . .

But I can tell you his story . . .

I met him in the mid-1980s. By that point he'd already established himself as one of the pioneers in the field of employment opportunities for people who were developmentally disabled – and had coined the phrase “affirmative business.” But his journey began more than two decades earlier.

In the spring of 1964, he was a 29-year-old Korean War vet and former Benedictine Monk who'd returned to school for a graduate degree in business after working as a carpenter. He'd accepted a job with Bendix for \$8,000, not a bad salary at the time, and was preparing to graduate when his advisor at St. Thomas College asked for a favor.

“You want me to go for another interview?”

His advisor nodded.

“But I've already accepted a job!”

“You're not listening,” said his advisor. “I just need you to take an *interview*. There's this nun over at the Archdiocese. She keeps calling me and asking me to send her somebody to interview for a position she's creating. She's an old friend. Would you please go over there and get her off my back?”

John said sure. He owed the guy.

"So I went over to the Archdiocese," he told me years later, "and they sent me down the hall to Sister Ann Marie's office. The door was shut, her nameplate on the wall. I knocked and heard a voice telling me to come in.

"So I opened the door and walked in – and as soon as I saw the nun behind the desk I knew I was in trouble! It was the nun who'd taught me piano lessons 20 years before!"

Sister Ann Marie walked over to him, asked him to sit down, then placed a hand on his shoulder, looked him in the eye and said, "Young man, I want three years of your life!"

John recalled the experience years later. "I absolutely cannot tell you what the hell went through my head," he laughed, still a bit stunned. "I really don't know what happened in that meeting or why I said yes. This blue fog descended on me and I walked out of there saying yes. I don't know what she did. I can't explain it to this day. It was voodooism – she just worked a magic spell on me. There was no good reason for me accepting. And then I had to go home and tell my wife I'd just accepted a job for \$4,000 instead of \$8,000!"

"HOW MUCH DO YOU NEED?"

What Sister Ann Marie wanted John to do was start a high school for kids who were developmentally disabled. It took him four years, not three – and then Sister Ann Marie sat him down again.

"Great work," she said. "But now what? What do these kids have to look forward to once they leave high school? Are they just going to sit on a couch watching TV all day for the rest of their lives?"

John thought about it and said he had an idea. He went to the Archbishop and told him he wanted to start a job-training program for his high school graduates.

"How much do you need?" asked the Archbishop.

"One hundred dollars." He needed to incorporate, buy a circular saw and a sewing machine.

And with that he launched a nonprofit in St. Paul called the Opportunity Training Workshop (OTW). Fourteen young adults were his first clients – seven men and seven women between the ages of 18 and 24. Within five years OTW had become a successful sheltered workshop, with more than 200 clients and 11 social workers managing the operations.

"I thought we were humming along pretty well," said John years later, "so I took a six-month sabbatical and visited other sheltered workshops across Canada and the United States."

SOMETHING HAD TO CHANGE

It was a life-changing journey. At every stop, he became more and more depressed. The people in the workshops weren't doing real work. They weren't being driven by market demand: They were simply assigned make-work, building birdhouses, stitching pot-holders, decorating ashtrays.

On top of that, they were only working eight or ten hours a week and being paid 50 cents or a dollar an hour. There was no dignity in the work and no chance for people to achieve any level of financial self-sufficiency.

John realized something had to change . . .

Back in St. Paul, on a sunny April evening, he asked his 11 social workers to meet with him at a nearby hotel. He served them wine and cheese.

Then he fired them all.

A few moments later he passed out applications. "Starting tomorrow," he said, "we are no longer a rehab center – we're a business. Starting tomorrow we no longer have clients or patients – we have employees. And starting tomorrow we are no longer clinicians – we're business people.

"If you can get your minds and hearts and souls around that change, I want you back. If you can't, I'll understand and I'll help you find new jobs."

John had become convinced that the best way to enhance the self-respect of the people he employed was to *give* them more respect. That meant establishing conditions typical of a business – normal work hours, the use of appropriate technologies, market-driven benchmarks, training and development programs, competitive wages, bonus plans, career tracks.

Nine of his 11 social workers stayed, and by the time John retired in 1997, Minnesota Diversified Industries (MDI) had become a \$68.5 million business, all from earned revenue except for an occasional grant to purchase major equipment. MDI had more than 50 corporate clients, 1,000 employees (600 of them disabled or disadvantaged), and five plants throughout the state of Minnesota.

MDI's biggest client turned out to be the United States Postal Service, with two contracts: All the plastic tote boxes used in postal service offices nationwide were being manufactured at the MDI plants; and more than 30 million commemorative stamps issued by the federal government each year were being assembled into presentation packets for collectors by people in the MDI clean rooms.

THE MENTOR

But John's work wasn't finished when he changed the culture and name of his organization. During the next 35 years he became the nation's leading ambassador for affirmative businesses, writing three books and delivering keynote speeches and conducting workshops all over the world. He acted as a special consultant to the United Nations and to the USSR Social Services Fund. And he served as a mentor to countless others starting similar businesses, joined with me to co-found the Affirmative Business Alliance of North America in 1987, and became part of the core group (and later chaired the organization) that created Workability International, which today has nearly 135 members in 41 countries.

Over the years, John continued to re-invent the world of work for people with disabilities and disadvantages. He especially emphasized the importance of four key principles:

- Operating as a business and generating profits
- Employing a "blended" workforce
- Using non-disabled employees as role models
- Giving employees the opportunity to fail

Money comes first

"I don't know how the idea ever came about that 'profit' is good or bad or that 'business' is good or bad," he would often lament.

"'Business' is just 'business' and 'profit' is just 'profit.' The only evil parts are some of the people who happen to be managing the businesses or using the profits.

"I know I can't do any of the things I want to do without money," he'd say. "If I don't make money, I won't be here tomorrow to do *anything*."

Of course, a lot of people, even today, object to "making money" in the nonprofit world, but John would remind them "they need to read (Peter) Drucker. Profit is what permits you to stay in business.

"Show me a company that is not generating a profit and I will show you one that is going out of business. If you can't get comfortable with that then you don't understand business and you need to get out."

He also "listened, *really* listened to my employees. I heard them saying they wanted to be successful employees. And I realized they couldn't be successful employees unless I was a successful employer – and I couldn't be a successful employer without being a successful business. That's what it's all about."

Critics often claim the nonprofit sector should not become what they call "a shadow private sector" because it will lose track of its social mission. They say the "corporate" way of doing business is fraught with dangers.

John's response?

"Bullshit. You can use those exact words. Business is business. Business is neither good nor bad. There are some assholes running businesses that do bad things with them, but business is business.

"It comes down to this: What are you going to do with the business? I'm a social entrepreneur. I'm looking for both financial and social dividends. But if I don't have the money, I won't have the mission."

Too many janitors

One of John's most controversial innovations took place when he looked more closely at sheltered workshops.

"They were trying to run businesses where all the employees were disabled or disadvantaged," he recalled. "I thought, if you tried that with a *real* business, you'd get killed! If you tried to open a bank and you hired all janitors, the building would be clean as hell, but you'd go down the tubes.

"So I wouldn't hire ten janitors – and I wouldn't hire 10 presidents. I'd have one president, a couple of janitors, some tellers and clerks. I'd have a mixed workforce. And if I'd do that in a normal business, why would I do it any differently in one of *my* businesses? So I decided we needed a fully integrated workforce with people who had different levels of skill, aptitude and ability."

The blended workforce strategy ran afoul of the protective mentality embraced during the 1970s by most social workers and family members. "Sheltered" workshops meant just that: Protecting people who were disabled from the outside world.

But John believed integrating the workforce was essential to building his business – and thereby creating more jobs and career paths for people who were disabled or disadvantaged. A blended workforce opened up broad areas of business opportunities for MDI that would otherwise have remained closed.

"If all my employees were disabled," he reasoned, "then out of all the jobs available we could probably only do about 40 per cent. The other 60 per cent would be beyond our reach. But, if I had an integrated workforce, I'd have a shot at the other 60 per cent as well."

As the years passed and the blended workforce approach began to be widely adopted, people would

ask John for the ideal ratio of disabled to non-disabled workers.

"There isn't any," he'd tell them. "What kind of work are you trying to do? Sometimes it might be an 80/20 mix based on the demands of the job. Sometimes it might be just the reverse – 20/80." Over-all, however, John did find "if we deviated very much from a 60/40 mix, we lost a lot of our viability and punch. If we dropped below 40 per cent non-disabled workers, we changed as an organization significantly."

Tying up her kerchief

Once he began to integrate his workforce in order to function more effectively as a business, John began to notice something else as well.

"It's so important to people who are disabled to be just like the rest of us," he'd tell me repeatedly. "Our non-disabled employees became role models – and how powerful that is!"

He noticed it the first time when MDI started a production welding operation.

"Jan O'Rourke, one of the welders, had two people who were disabled serving as station loaders, filling up the jigs with components to be welded. And Jan, of course, tied up her hair in a kerchief so she wouldn't get sparks in it and catch on fire.

"Well, the next day, Bob and Greg both came to work with kerchiefs tied around their heads.

"And it dawned on me . . . of course! They want to be like us! But we were training them in sheltered environments and expecting them to go into the outside world and be a success on a job when they didn't even know what the hell it's like out there.

"I can't give you a chambray shirt and a pair of jeans and a wide belt and a buckle and a wallet with a long chain on it and a pair of boots and expect you to go to a truckers-only counter and pass as a trucker, even though you've got the uniform – you still can't pass if you don't have the language, the body language, the experiences you need.

“So what we had to do was make our work settings more realistic, more industrial, so that when they did leave for the outside world, they took with them not only the job skills they needed, but also the social skills.”

One aspect of the integrated workforce really surprised him, though.

“I didn’t anticipate how much trouble the non-disabled people were going to have working with the disabled,” he admitted years later. “That one snuck up on me. I expected our non-disabled employees to come in neutral, maybe a bit negative, but over time see that these folks were able to do a lot of things – not everything – but a lot of things.”

“What I didn’t realize was how emotionally charged any situation is when you have a large number of people with disabilities involved. I didn’t realize the impact it was going to have on the non-disabled. We had something like 70 per cent turnover in the first 18 months among the non-disabled workers.”

“The only thing I could ever put my finger on was that it was such an emotionally charged situation, so demanding emotionally, that small problems they would probably have dealt with easily in a lot of other circumstances just became more than they could handle.”

“So we addressed the issue by creating an employee support service program for both disabled and non-disabled workers, and almost 80 per cent of the non-disabled people used it. And eventually we re-wrote our mission statement to emphasize “providing a supportive environment for *all* employees.”

The opportunity to fail

John believed passionately that his employees could do anything they put their minds to – and he constantly challenged them to take risks.

“Too many systems are built to exclude the possibility of failing,” he complained, “and if you do that, you’ve excluded the possibility of succeeding. Sure, any time you build a system where only

success can happen, *you’ve* succeeded – but *not* the individual who goes through the system.

“So we challenged our people, asked them to get better and better at what they did. Yes, it was a risk, but without risk there’s no dignity. And there’s no success unless there’s an opportunity to fail.”

John believed people with disabilities could accept more responsibility than they had been given in the past. So he gave it to them. But he also believed that was *all* he could do.

“As a company,” he told me once, “we can’t ultimately be responsible for the happiness of specific employees. We can create opportunities for them – but that’s as much as we can do. We can’t go beyond that point. That’s it. The maximum you can do is create an opportunity. Whether the person takes advantage of it or doesn’t, that’s their choice. If you try to do more than that, you’re going to drive yourself crazy.”

“So, we fired people. People with disabilities and people without disabilities. They didn’t all make it at MDI. Because some of them chose not to try.” The rationale was simple: “Our business depended on them,” he said. “If they couldn’t fulfill their obligations, we had to take them off the line, send them back for more training or send them somewhere else.”

* * *

John had an aversion to “people who see the glass half empty all the time. They look at all the problems in society and complain about everything that’s stopping them from doing what they know really needs to be done.

“That’s not how I see the world. I see a world with unlimited possibilities. The fact that the money isn’t available today doesn’t mean anything – it means I haven’t looked in the right place yet. It doesn’t mean the world is going to hell in a hand-basket.

“It’s dangerous being around those people. It’s scary. You could start thinking like them after awhile.”

John never did.

"There are so many challenges out there," he would tell me, again and again. "So much for us to do. It's like sitting down at a table to eat an elephant – the task just seems completely overwhelming. So there's only one thing to do.

"Just sit down and take the first bite."

Sidebar: Teaching George to count

John DuRand often claimed it was possible to break down any task to the point where even the most severely disabled individual could be productive.

I once asked him how he learned to do that – and he took me back to something that happened in the early years of MDI.

He told me about teaching George to count . . .

"He was one of the most severely disabled individuals I've ever worked with," John remembered. "He was about 35 years old and had very limited speech, a very personal type of speech. You had to be around him a long time to even understand what he was saying. But he was able to do tasks by mirroring or mimicking someone else.

"His mother brought him in and asked if there was anything I could do for him – and the first thing I thought of was a movie I'd just seen about (psychologist) B. F. Skinner, who'd taught a chicken to peck a dot three times to get corn. I knew George had a much more highly evolved brain than a chicken, even with his limitations. Hell, if a chicken could do things, George could, too – he's 100 times brighter than any damn chicken put on this earth.

"So I went home that night and tried to figure out how to use him. We had a contract at the time to make specialty vending kits, and I tried to figure out where I could put George so I would be the least vulnerable.

"My budget was so tight. I couldn't risk damaging a product, because I'd have to eat the cost. I couldn't have him staple the kits because, if he screwed up, then I'd have to go back to the printer and have him reprint the inserts and it would

cost me more money than I was getting for the job. I had to figure out where I could put George so it wouldn't cost me out-of-pocket money even if he did create excessive errors – somewhere I could just throw in more labor to correct the problem.

"Turned out the only possible place was in the last stage of the packaging process, where the kits had to be put in a box in groups of ten. If he screwed up, we'd just have to dump them out and re-package them.

"So I thought, 'I've got to teach George how to do that. I've got to teach him to count. Ten's a big number – why don't I teach him to count to five?'

"I called the customer and asked, 'Would it really make any difference if the kits are packaged in groups of five instead of ten?'

"The customer said, 'Well, not really, if it's consistent, but it's much easier for people to do ten at a time.'

"I said, 'That may be, but I think I've got another approach where five would serve me better with the employees I have.'

"And the customer said, 'Go ahead, do it.'

"So that afternoon I worked about two-and-a-half hours with George teaching him how to count to five – and got absolutely nowhere. I thought, 'What the heck, George's just new here and it's getting on in the day, he's probably fatigued. We'll take it up in the morning first thing.'

"Next morning we started up again and worked until break and there really wasn't any progress.

"One of my other developmentally disabled employees was working nearby and in frustration I turned to her and said, 'Jane, teach George how to count, I'm going for a cup of coffee.'

"She looked at me and said, 'What?'

"I said, 'Teach George how to count.'

"Jane said, 'WHAT?'

"I said, 'Teach him how to pack these things!'

"Jane said, 'Oh,' and turned to George, raised up her hand and said, 'George, how many?'

"And George looked at her fingers and said, 'Two, four, six, three, two.'

"Jane said, 'Fine, give me that many.'

"She didn't care what he called them or whether he counted them: Could he *identify* five, that was the real task. By the end of the day, he could match up one kit with each of his fingers and when he had that many he could put them together and put them in a box. George did it and George could pack. He didn't have to know how to count or know how to deal with numbers. I was trying to teach him something unnecessary.

"It was quite a lesson. I realized all you have to do is break down the job until you're smarter than the task. That way, *every* individual can be productive."

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