

Then he fired them all . . .

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.

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It's impossible for me to be objective about John DuRand (1934-2008). 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 moment 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.

But John's work wasn't finished when he changed the culture and name of his organization. During the next 25 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 more than 130 members in more than 40 countries.

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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, and I'll share his views in next month's "Jerr's Journal":

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