

# Lifeworks Donor Profile

## Done and Joanne Varey



Don and Joanne Varey knew there was something wrong with their young daughters. But they didn't know what. Neither did the doctors they went to with their questions.

"We were living in Texas, and the medical care was awful," says Don. "You may as well have talked to a wall as get an answer out of them."

The couple decided to return to their home state of Minnesota.

"We knew we could get decent health care here," says Don.

The care was indeed better, but the answers not what they'd hoped for: their daughters were diagnosed with mental retardation. It was devastating news to receive, especially in the early 1960s.

"At the time, there were not many options for children like ours," says Joanne. "Most children were at home 100 percent of the time, or lived in state hospitals."

The Vareys were adamant that their daughters not be placed in a state hospital. But keeping them at home full-time was a challenge.

"Our children needed a place to go; as their mother, I needed it as well," says Joanne. "Being at home with my girls was incredibly difficult."

The couple investigated their options, and decided to place their two oldest daughters, Jean and Ann, in a residential facility in Roseau, Minn.

"We knew two other families whose kids were there, and Don had a cousin in town so we felt there would be someone to watch over them," says Joanne. Still, the situation was far from ideal.

"Roseau was at the other end of the world," says Don of the city 400 miles away. "The kids needed a place to go that was safe and close to home."

Since there was no place in the Twin Cities that met their criteria, the Vareys decided to create one. After years of advocacy, the Vareys and two other families obtained enough funding from Dakota County to rent a one-room school house and establish a day program. Don made kid-size furniture to outfit the school and painted it primary colors. They hired a teacher and enrolled their daughter Ann. It was the birth of Dakota County Day Activity Center — now Lifeworks.

"It wasn't an easy thing to go through," says Don. "People in the neighborhood weren't accepting. They didn't want their children mixing with disabled kids. Neighbors did everything but burn the house down."

Still, the Vareys pressed on. And eventually, society caught up. In 1973, section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 prevented schools from discriminating against children with disabilities and mandated that they be provided with reasonable accommodations. In 1975, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act was passed, further strengthening protections for children with disabilities.

Changing the laws didn't immediately alter people's attitudes, of course. But with time, society's views began to change.

"People like our children are much more accepted now," says Joanne.

Though they insist they established Dakota County Day Activity Center simply to meet their own family's needs, the Vareys do enjoy knowing the seed they planted has grown into an organization that helps so many others.

"We never dreamed what we started would grow into something magnificent," says Joanne. "It's wonderful to know there is a place for people like our girls to go."

Though daughters Ann and Jean have passed away, Lisa Varey remains a Lifeworks client.

"Lisa stands by the front door waiting for the bus five days a week," says Joanne. "She loves the interaction and the activity at Lifeworks. All of our girls had a need to go, go, go."

The Vareys remain deeply involved with Lifeworks as well. They support the organization financially, and Don volunteers as a handyman.

"The people who work at Lifeworks are good people, and have made the organization what it is today," says Don. "This place changed our lives. I'm happy to help them all I can."



Don and Joanne Varey with their daughter Lisa.