

ROBERT DYKSTRA,

'57

SOLDIER. SINGER. PROFESSOR. READING EXPERT. RIVER FALLS ALUMNUS.

Why can't Johnny read? Ask Bob Dykstra, '57. "When (Rudolf) Flesch's book came out, it caused quite a stir," says Dykstra, recalling the controversial bestseller *Why Johnny Can't Read*, which debuted while he was studying elementary education at River Falls State College. Flesch's book emphasized the use of phonics to teach grade school students to read.

Dykstra has spent his career teaching and studying elementary reading methods. And he himself experienced every kind of educational environment over his 70+ years. As a youngster he was taught in a small country school. He received his first teaching certification from Sheboygan County Normal School and then taught in a one-room country schoolhouse in Plymouth, Wis.

"Those of us who went to one-room schools were not short-changed in terms of skills," says Dykstra. He attributes this to the repetitive instructions students in one-room schools received. Older students often taught younger ones. It was where the peer coaching style of teaching originated, he explains.

Drafted during the Korean War, Dykstra experienced the regimented teaching style of the U.S. Army. Stationed at Fort Riley, Kansas, he was recognized for his singing ability and joined a quartet known as "Hut Four" that traveled the country in an effort to recruit new soldiers. This experience included four national television appearances, one on the popular Arthur Godfrey Talent Scouts show. Concluding his two-year enlistment, Dykstra moved to the Twin Cities to continue singing with the group and to earn some money that would help pay expenses associated with finishing his degree.

The music career that lured him to the region never materialized—at least not in a big way. So not long after arriving in Minneapolis, Dykstra decided to take advantage of the G.I. Bill and return to college. Still a Wisconsin resident, he decided to avoid paying out-of-state fees and find the nearest Wisconsin school that would allow him to receive his advanced teaching certificate. But he continued to sing with Hut Four.

Named for a marching cadence, The Hut Four Quartet sang at homecoming and seasonal events. "We even serenaded the women outside Hathorn Hall," recalls Dykstra, referring to an era when only women students lived on campus. Males rented rooms in residential areas, and about 100 of the roughly 1,000 students in 1956 were veterans.

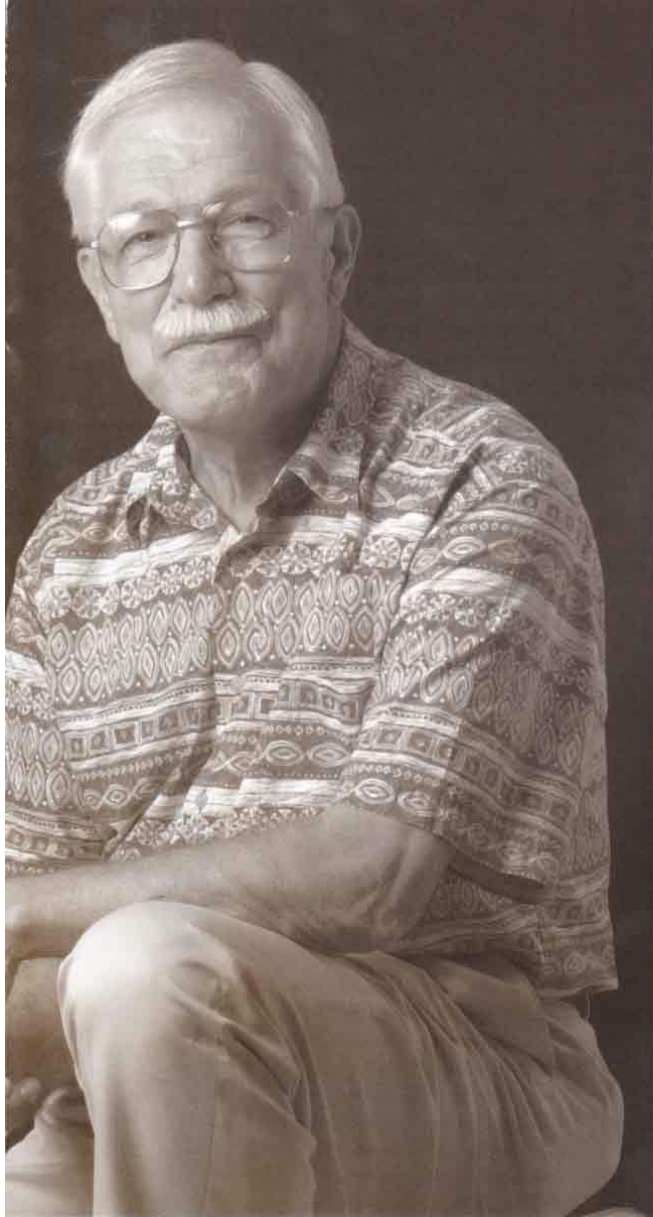
BY
MICHAEL
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SPEAKING HIS MIND

"IT WAS A NAIVE EXPECTATION THAT WE COULD SOLVE THE QUESTION OF HOW TO TEACH READING FOR ALL-TIME. THE BEST THING TO DO WHEN PREPARING TEACHERS IS TO MAKE THEM AWARE OF LOTS OF TOOLS. THROUGH EXPERIENCE THEY WILL KNOW HOW TO USE THEM."

— Robert Dykstra, '57, on his groundbreaking report "The First Grade Studies"





Dykstra spent his free time in intramural athletics and weekend quarter engagements. "We were very active and very supportive of the school," says Dykstra of the veterans returning from service. However, there were a few on campus who engaged in some collegiate high jinks, recalls Dykstra, mentioning an obscure group of students called the Dirty Dozen. He doesn't linger on the subject.

Graduating from River Falls in 1957 with a bachelor of science degree in elementary education, Dykstra fully expected to find himself in an elementary school classroom teaching youngsters to read. He accepted a job with the Hopkins, Minn., school district. But then University of Minnesota Professor Ted Clymer, a 1949

UW-RF graduate, persuaded Dykstra to join him as his teaching assistant. So began his foray into the art and science of teaching children to read by way of teaching teachers.

Young associate professor Dykstra, along with colleague Guy Bond, soon published the nationally-acclaimed groundbreaking report known as "The First Grade Studies."

It was the mid-1960s. Teachers were being bombarded with a variety of new programs for teaching beginning reading largely because of Flesch's criticisms of current methodology. The "Run, Dick, Run" stories from then-popular "Dick and Jane" reading programs were being challenged by "Nan can fan Dan" stories from newly-published linguistic readers. Instructional materials incorporating the revolutionary Initial Teaching Alphabet were finding their way into first-grade classrooms.

"All these things were coming along without research to back them up," says Dykstra.

The U.S. Department of Education had placed Bond and Dykstra in charge of a study that examined the most effective techniques for teaching primary students to read. "But it was a naive expectation that we could solve the question of how to teach reading for all-time," recalls Dykstra, alluding to the eclectic findings. However, the study was so comprehensive that the Summer 1967 "Reading Research Quarterly" devoted the entire issue to publishing its findings.

With a doctorate in educational psychology, Dykstra was promoted to professor in 1969 and served the University of Minnesota until retiring in 1993.

He has remained connected to UW-RF throughout his career. Several former faculty members received their doctorates as his advisees, including Marilyn Naylor, Brenda Shearer, Kathleen Daly, Georganna Ahlfors, and the late Ronald Johnson, who was instrumental in developing UW-RF's master of science in education reading program. Dykstra's son, Paul, attended UW-RF and played left wing on the 1983 NAIA National Hockey Championship team. Dykstra received the 1998 UW-RF Distinguished Alumnus Award. Both he and his son have served on the UW-RF Foundation Board.

With more than 40 years of practical experience and dedication to the vocation of teaching children to read, Dykstra will tell you there are many reasons why Johnny can't read. The home (and community) literary environment is a major contributor to a child's success or lack thereof in becoming a competent reader, he points out, adding:

"The best thing to do when preparing teachers is to make them aware of lots of tools. Through experience they will know how to use them," he concludes. ■

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