

# Leaving a Path for Those who Follow: Dr. Priscilla Day

Susan E. Smalling

**Abstract:** Dr. Priscilla Day is a mother of three, grandmother of seven, a pipe carrier and Ogichidaakwe on a traditional Big Drum in her Leech Lake Tribal community, a social work professor, and a national leader for American Indian child welfare research and policy. Dr. Day has managed all these roles and responsibilities while consistently keeping the needs of Indigenous communities paramount in her life and work. She has led efforts to work on child welfare disparities for American Indian children resulting in yearly intensive training for tribal welfare workers, curriculums specific to the needs of individual tribal communities, and the creation of an Indian Child Welfare court. She has mentored countless students through social work masters degrees, developing future leaders for the field. Dr. Day does all this work focused not on the outcomes but the process. She leads by creating common goals; affirming and using the strengths of all involved and being sure all parties can both hear and be heard.

**Keywords:** Child Welfare, Indigenous Populations

## Introduction

Dr. Priscilla Day is an enrolled tribal member of the Leech Lake Reservation of Anishinaabe and from the Bear Clan. She serves as a pipe carrier and Ogichidaakwe (woman warrior, leader and helper) on a traditional Big Drum for her tribal community. Dr. Day is the mother of three children and has seven grandchildren. She is a full professor in the social work program at the University of Minnesota Duluth (UMD) where she has been on the faculty for 22 years. She currently serves as the Department Head, a role she has had for 6 of her 22 years in the program. Dr. Day is also the Director and Principal Investigator for the Center for Regional Tribal and Child Welfare Studies housed in the UMD social work program. The UMD social work program has a long history of working in collaboration with American Indian people. Dr. Day has taught the courses related to that focus and has developed the curriculum related to American Indian communities and American Indian child welfare. She has served on numerous national committees and has served as principal investigator on several large federally funded projects, writing extensively about cultural competency and the many issues facing American Indian families and communities, particularly in child welfare. Dr. Day has established curriculums designed to address specific tribal child welfare needs, developed programs to address child welfare disparities and served as a trainer and curriculum developer for the Department of Human Services. She has received numerous awards including the University of Minnesota Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare's 2015 Child Welfare

Leadership Award.

Dr. Day has maintained an active role in her tribal community and remained grounded in her traditional values while engaging in her professional efforts. Her work is grounded in being of service to American Indian communities and specifically American Indian children and families in her home state of Minnesota. Minnesota has the highest level of disproportionality and disparities for American Indian children in out of home placement in the nation. In 2013, Minnesota had a disproportionality index of 14.8 for American Indian children in out of home care. Nebraska was a distant second with an index of 8.8 (Summers, 2015). Regional tribal partners, as well as other tribes in Minnesota, have identified this as a critical problem for many years. Dr. Day has committed much of her career to addressing this issue by creating systemic change in the child welfare system, helping tribes build infrastructure for supporting families, and training and mentoring social work students to engage in culturally appropriate child welfare practice. In each of these areas, Dr. Day has always put as much focus on the process as the outcome of her work.

## Leadership Focused on Process

The story of Dr. Priscilla Day is best illustrated in the processes through which she has advocated for American Indian families and communities; not solely by her accomplishments, though they are many. When Dr. Day received her statewide award for her achievements in child welfare, the speakers at this event mentioned her achievements, but all of them spoke more extensively regarding *how* she went about

achieving those outcomes. They described how Dr. Day enters every room attempting to understand what each party in the room wants and then attending to all those needs – even when the needs appear incompatible or when faced with blatantly oppressive values and positions. In fact, all but one person I talked to for this article said something early on about her “uncanny” “inclusive” “remarkable” (this list could go on) ability to bring people together.

Dr. Day often has to use that uncanny skill in very challenging contexts. As she starts each new effort to promote American Indian child welfare, Dr. Day has to assess where the people in front of her are in their understanding of American Indian people and American Indian child welfare. She cannot presuppose knowledge – much less, attitudes and skills. This adds an additional layer to her already complex and challenging child welfare work. However, one of her long time colleagues noted that her strong critical consciousness regarding systemic oppression and privilege never poses a barrier to her work. On the contrary, he marveled at how she always remains positive, even optimistic, in light of these challenges, seeing them as opportunities for progress. Her work in American Indian Child Welfare is a strong example of this optimism in action. Dr. Day believes “Indian children are all our children” and should be treated accordingly in child welfare. She uses this value as a powerful tool in motivating diverse interests – state and county social services, tribal governments and communities and academia – to unite around the common goal of promoting the needs of American Indian children and communities.

This does not mean she will compromise in a way that sacrifices the will or best interests of tribal communities. Dr. Day never loses sight of the mandate to keep the needs of the tribes and children paramount. In one effort, she spent a year working with a consortium (like the one described above) in which the tribes agreed on a course of action denied by the state. The impasse could not be breached and Dr. Day chose to walk away rather than concede. Despite her obligations to her academic setting and various committee appointments in national organizations, she has never waived on the primacy of tribal priorities. She firmly believes in holding all stakeholders accountable – even if that

leads to impasse – but does so in a spirit of hope and inclusion.

Dr. Day serves as director of the Center for Regional and Tribal Welfare Studies at the University of Minnesota Duluth. The staff at the Center describe Dr. Day as a passionate and committed national leader in American Indian child welfare. She developed a team comprised of people with complementary skills and talents, allowing for each person’s strength to be included and well utilized. Leadership and organizational structure in the Center are rooted in Indigenous values: all members of her team have a voice in how they move forward. One of her colleagues (a former student) explained the Center as an environment that is totally inclusive. She had never worked in an environment where it is all about what you do well and not your weaknesses. Dr. Day never has her own agenda; instead, she seeks to orient to the needs of the group so everyone is heard and, in turn, everyone can hear her perspectives.

Dr. Day’s leadership style is unique and universally emphasized by her colleagues. One colleague described her as having a “wise owl” presence, providing assurance and calm in stressful situations. He further emphasized how she exercises her voice without ever having to assert authority. Another colleague picked up this point, saying she absolutely understands the difference between leadership and authority. She leads by example and emphasizes how any project will only come to fruition through collaboration.

### **A Commitment to American Indian Child Welfare**

I would be remiss if I did not share more of the accomplishments that have come from Dr. Day’s work as a leader in child welfare. Dr. Day has served as director of the Center for Regional and Tribal Welfare Studies since 2008, and was part of its founding in 2005. The Center’s core values include inclusiveness, cooperation and intercultural competence. Its mission is to advance the well-being of children by strengthening families and communities through social work education, research, and outreach in the region, working in partnership with American Indian tribes. The Center provides stipends to students committed to working in public and/or tribal child welfare and offers opportunities for their practical learning.

The Center's partners include representatives from all seven Ojibwe tribes in Minnesota, who provide guidance on curriculum and community projects and discuss critical American Indian child welfare issues. Through this partnership, Dr. Day and the Center conducted a study on what it takes to raise healthy Anishinaabeg children. The project highlighted the strengths in American Indian communities and facilitated the development of trainings so they could address the needs of American Indian children both in child welfare and in the community.

Under Dr. Day's leadership, the Center has maintained long-term relationships across systems, working collaboratively with tribes, county governments, the Minnesota Department of Human Services, and communities across northern Minnesota to gain understanding of existing issues in child welfare practice and implement state-of-the-art solutions. For example, these collaborations revealed the need for Native-specific child welfare training in Minnesota, sparking the creation of the Summer Institute in American Indian Child Welfare, the only 3-day training and networking opportunity for tribal social workers, now in its 8th year. Dr. Day and the Center were also key players in starting the first ICWA (Indian Child Welfare Act) court in Minnesota.

Nationally, Dr. Day has used her ability to leverage partnerships among key stakeholders to advance the work to which she and her colleagues are so dedicated. Dr. Day was recently asked to be on the National Advisory Committee and serve as a consultant to the Children's Bureau Center for Tribes. She was able to secure a competitive National Child Welfare Workforce Institute Grant for her Center for Regional and Tribal Child Welfare Studies and St. Louis County Public Health and Human Services (the child welfare services provider in the county in which the Center is located). The project addresses issues such as child welfare workforce development and retention, disparities and strengthening relationships across county/tribal child welfare systems. The project partners expect to develop a model of American Indian child welfare service provision that is guided by family, community and tribe that will improve organizational effectiveness in working with American Indian children and families. Part of the

grant provides a generous stipend for students to earn an MSW with a focus on Indian Child Welfare. In addition, the Center is doing additional curriculum development to train students to practice evidence-based trauma-focused care to American Indian families.

### **Mentor and Social Work Educator**

In addition to her work on Indian child welfare, Dr. Day is a social work educator with a strong commitment to the recruitment and retention of American Indian students into the social work field. She has served as the director of American Indian Projects, a program through the University of Minnesota Duluth providing programming and support for the cultural and academic needs of American Indian students. Through this role, her teaching, department leadership and advising, Dr. Day has facilitated several hundred American Indian students receiving their masters' degrees in social work in a culturally congruent program. Many of these students have gone on to work for their own or other tribes in child welfare and child welfare leadership positions.

As an example of Dr. Day's mentorship, one American Indian student had indicated she had a significant life struggle she thought for sure would preclude her from finishing the master's program. Underneath the surface of the practical issue, this student felt hopeless and inadequate for master's level work. She describes how Dr. Day intervened holistically, helping her with the issue by connecting her to a graduate assistant job and giving other concrete supports while also providing academic and emotional support. The student not only graduated but also went to become a leader and advocate for Indigenous children. She credits Dr. Day with making this outcome possible.

Dr. Day has also worked with equal dedication and compassion with the non-Indian students in the social work program, this writer included. I first met Dr. Day as a master's student. At the time, I was a privileged and clueless young, middle-classed, educated, white and able-bodied woman with all the right intentions but with all the wrong information, attitudes and beliefs. In many ways I was the polar opposite of the student described above – full of confidence, with zero understanding of all I did not know. I was incredibly fortunate to be able to participate in a learning circle led by Dr. Day and Dr. Anne Tellett focused

specifically on helping a group of white students learn about American Indian culture while also intensely examining our own white privilege. In that learning circle, Dr. Day treated me and the other white students with the greatest compassion and patience while also never letting us off the hook for our privilege. She slowly but surely helped us “know better” so we could “do better.” Dr. Day knew how to keep us right on the edge before becoming overwhelmed while never letting us settle back into our privilege. She never dictated what we should think or believe, she just knew how to perfectly frame a question to stimulate critical thinking and personal growth. Each student could move forward at their own pace while somehow also allowing the group to progress as a collective. By the end, we all had acquired significant knowledge about systematic oppression and privilege, about what a different cultural perspective really means and looks like. However, perhaps more importantly, our attitudes and even our core beliefs and values had shifted. The knowledge we learned was not forgettable as it was tied to a fundamental shift in how we saw the world. With this shift, we also knew our social work practice had to shift to accommodate the cultural needs of diverse clients. Specifically, we all learned that clients’ cultural perspectives were not to be considered with our own worldviews as the backdrop or comparison point. Rather, the clients’ worldviews needed to be at the forefront in the services we provided. It seems easy as an idea, but doing it in practice requires the fundamental understanding that Dr. Day cultivated in us.

On one occasion during this time, I stormed into Dr. Day’s office complaining vociferously about my struggles trying to get my family members to “get it” regarding an issue of privilege. After an entire weekend of doing so, I was cranky and exhausted and looking for comfort and some praise for my efforts. Instead, Dr. Day kindly but firmly told me, “Susie, this is what we deal with every day.” I immediately flushed with embarrassment but Dr. Day was infinitely empathic in further processing my experiences with me. She helped me strategize how to better challenge those with privilege without consistently relying on those dealing with oppression to provide me support.

I use this story in my teaching often. It is a great example of making a mistake and then moving

forward. It is just one example of the many gifts Dr. Day has given me over the years. Dr. Day did not cut me off after this clear, “stuck on stupid” moment. Rather, she supported me moving forward. After I graduated with my MSW, she hired me back part time to facilitate learning circles built into her classes so I could carry my learning and new passion forward. She served on my dissertation committee though I attended a school several states away. Most importantly, she helped instill in me a lifelong commitment to social justice, a mandate that has informed all my life decisions both personal and professional. The reality is, Dr. Day did not do all this because I am special. There are many “Susies” from the individual to the community level she has worked with over the years who would have similar stories to tell. The commitment and time she has invested in me is what she is willing to put in with any person – assuming they will reciprocate that commitment moving forward.

The student I described above and I spent some time one afternoon talking about the experience of working with Dr. Day over many years. Both of us emphasized this sense of responsibility she had given us for paying what we had learned from her forward. I talked about not liking how my description of this sounds like a quid pro quo – she did this for me so I owe her paying that back. In truth, for me, it feels much more like a gift than an obligation. The other student explained to me how it is actually Dr. Day embodying the traditional Indigenous value of always working with the next seven generations in mind. Dr. Day manages to not only do that in her own work, but to instill that value in her students without every having to overtly say she was doing so. Most of the colleagues interviewed for this paper were also former students and, like them, many of her students are carrying the work forward in their own careers. For example, one explains: “Any bit of good work I’ve done with tribal communities is owed to Dr. Day. First as a teacher and later as a supervisor and always as a mentor, Dr. Day has been instrumental in my growth as a professional and as a person. I am grateful for her patience and openness as a teacher and her vision as a colleague. It has been a gift to work with and learn from her.”

### **An Emphasis on Collective Success**

I have heard Dr. Day speak many times about her work and discussed her life course with her on

multiple occasions. When discussing what she perceives as failures or struggles, she consistently speaks in the singular first person, “I was unable to get a grant; I could not find a way to communicate with the administrator.” As soon as she starts to talk about any success or productive process, she switches to the use of the collective first person, “we got the grant; we created a handbook regarding raising healthy Anishinaabe children.” The failures are hers; the successes belong to all those with whom she worked – even those who she may have disagreed with in the process. I was there when Dr. Day accepted an award for child welfare leadership, as were many of her colleagues and family, including three of her grandchildren. She used the award as an opportunity to thank all those others as the ones truly deserving of praise. She did not do so generically – a quick thank you to family and colleagues. She dedicated her whole speech to them, detailing the contributions each person makes to the work she does.

I will end with a quote from another former student

and colleague of Dr. Day that perfectly captures her way of working and being: “I have incredible respect for the way that Dr. Day approaches her work. She is both strategic and passionate in her advocacy for tribal communities. Few people have the ability that Dr. Day has to speak truth to power in a way that is both pointed and kind. In so many ways Dr. Day embodies the idea of the ‘engaged scholar’ but I think more simply, she works and lives in a good way.”

### References

Summers, A. (2015). *Disproportionality rates for children in foster care* [Technical assistance bulletin]. Reno, Nevada: National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges.

**About the Authors:** Susan E. Smalling, Ph.D., MSW, LISW Assistant Professor & Director of Field Education, Department of Social Work and Family Studies, St. Olaf College (507-786-2222 x.3350; [smalling@stolaf.edu](mailto:smalling@stolaf.edu)).