

# Michael Jacobson, American Indian Social Work Advocate

Priscilla A. Day

**Abstract:** This reflection about Dr. Michael Jacobson is to honor his many contributions through the years to social work education and in particular to American Indian social work education. As an early organizer of the American Indian/Alaska Native Social Work Educators' group, Mike made his presence felt at the national level through service on various commissions and in other positions of service. He leaves a lasting legacy for other Indigenous social worker faculty members who can aspire to follow his lead.

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## Dr. Michael Jacobson: Indigenous Activist

Some people are always ready to help others; Dr. Michael Jacobson is that kind of person. Mike seemed to be involved in everything and never shied away from hard work. In my traditions, the Anishinaabe culture, our elders teach us that with great privilege comes great responsibility. We must use our gifts to help others. Mike understood and embodied this teaching.

Quite honestly, I wasn't sure what to make of Mike when I first met him. He was outspoken and seemed to be involved in a lot of work at the national level. That changed when I was scheduled to give a presentation about the retention and recruitment of American Indian/Alaska Native social work students at CSWE in Chicago. I checked into the conference hotel and stayed there for a day. I was surprised to get called down to the front desk and was told that the hotel had "overbooked" and they were going to move me out of my room to another hotel several miles away. My presentation on American Indian student recruitment and retention was scheduled for 8 AM the next morning. I tried my best to talk the hotel staff out of moving me but they were going to do it anyway. Mike happened to be walking by and recognized me from the American Indian/Alaska Native Social Work Educators meetings. He saw me looking frustrated at the front desk and came over to inquire about what was happening. Once I told him, he told the staff at the front desk to "wait a minute" and before I knew it, he had gone to someone in charge of the conference and told them that a member of the American Indian/Alaska Native Social Work Educators' group was going to be moved to another hotel. They came over to the front desk and informed the staff that I had to stay at the hotel. In a matter of minutes, my life was made less complicated. In the grand scheme of things, it was

not a big deal, but in that moment it was. That act of kindness endeared Mike to me. I saw that his willingness to speak up and intervene could make a difference for others. He did this kind of thing often, using his connections to make things better for others. I hadn't known it at the time, but I later learned that Mike was well known and respected by CSWE leadership because of his active involvement and outspoken advocacy so when he brought something to their attention, they listened.

Mike was usually one of the first people to speak up about social justice issues. Perhaps this is because Mike can relate personally. Those of you who know Mike know that he has not had an "easy" life. He has lived with multiple disabilities but never let that stop him from engaging fully with his family, his job, and the profession of social work. In recent years, Mike developed Parkinson's disease. Even though Mike was often physically uncomfortable, he continued to make important contributions. He put his values about engagement into action many times throughout the years. He was never one to sit quietly. If he believed in something, he gave it his best effort. Sometimes this made his life uncomfortable. Mike stood up for change while working at one university, and experienced overt racism as a result. He was verbally taunted and actually had someone spit on him. One American Indian/Alaska Native colleague said that Mike had a "willingness to stand up, advocate, be a voice; often when this meant confrontation with CSWE leaders and power structures." This call to social action and commitment to social justice is something that young Indigenous social work educators could do well to emulate.

Mike is very passionate about rural social work and American Indian social work in particular. His tribal affiliation is Creek/Seminole on one side and Lakota/Dakota on the other side of his family. Having

grown up and lived mostly in rural areas, he experienced oppression first hand. Mike felt it was his obligation to speak out and he did. Mike wrote articles and presented many papers on working with American Indians on topics including domestic violence, substance abuse, mental health, identity issues, and the recruitment and retention of American Indian students. Mike developed tribally-specific curricula in North Dakota to better prepare students to do a field practicum on reservations. He also worked with elders on community development projects and wrote about the importance of having the tribal community perspective when doing research.

American Indian/Alaska Native educators are a small community. The “Task Force on Native Americans in Social Work Education” study, commissioned by the CSWE, found there were 41 American Indian/Alaska Native full time social work faculty members in 2007, compared to 32 in 1977 (Cross et al., 2007). These numbers have not fluctuated much. In order to be heard Indigenous faculty had to speak up even when it might not be in our nature to do so. Mike chose to speak up.

Mike was involved in the American Indian/Alaska Native Social Work Educators Association from its earliest days. He was almost always the first person to respond to requests on the American Indian/Alaska Native Educators listserv with an offer to help, whether that was to volunteer to be interviewed or to provide academic references for someone writing an article. One non-Indigenous ally said that Mike offered to provide guidance and serve as a mentor when he learned that the person was writing about American Indian social work issues. Mike cared deeply about social work education and that was reflected in his national service and his willingness to reach out to those who needed assistance, whether that was students or other faculty members.

Mike Jacobson has had a long and productive academic career. He earned his Bachelors of General Studies from the University of Iowa in 1973, his MSW from the School of Social Work at the University of Iowa in 1974, and his Ph.D. 10 years later from the College of Education at the same university. Mike went on to work at social work programs starting at the University of Iowa in 1978,

Niagara University (1987-1991), and Delaware State College (1991-1992). He spent many years (1992-2002) at the University of North Dakota where he served as Acting BSSW Director and Program Chair. While there, he also worked with their IV-E (Child Welfare Grants).

An American Indian/Alaska Native faculty member told me that Mike often showed “his dogged determination that Native people and issues be represented within CSWE.” For example, Mike was adamant that American Indians/Alaska Natives be represented with as much visibility as possible at the CSWE Annual Program Meeting. One American Indian/Social Work educator who knows Mike well recounted that “he wanted us to have both special sessions and a track that reflected Native content” and he advocated to ensure this happened. He served at the CSWE as a certified Site Visitor from 1993 to 2009. He went on to be a Site Team Chair person from 2001 to 2004. He was also a member of the Diversity Advisory Committee (1993-1998) and Annual Program Meeting Corresponding Committees (1994-1997). Indeed, he made his presence felt at the national level.

Mike brought his unique perspectives as a multi-tribal person living with disabilities into every arena. He was an active member of the CSWE Commission on Disability and Persons with Disabilities from 2002 to 2004. He sought leadership roles at CSWE serving as Chair for the Commission on Racial, Ethnic and Cultural Diversity from 1995 to 1997, Chair for the National Selection Committee, Chair of the Minority Clinical Fellowship Program from 1992 to 1996 and as Chair for the Commission on Minority Group Concerns from 1995 to 1997. If that didn’t keep him busy enough, he also was a member of the Abstract Review Group for the International Social Symposium (1992-1994) and the International Social Work Commission (1992-1994). During many of these years, Mike was department chair as well. There are many more things Mike volunteered to do within his university, state, and on the national level that contributed to the foundation that those who came after him, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, can stand upon.

Through the years, Mike has been honored with many recognitions including Faculty Excellence for Research and Scholarship, Delaware State (1992); the

Martin Luther King, Jr. Award for Service, University of North Dakota (1999); and Distinguished Mentor, Lindenwood University (2000). Being recognized by his American Indian/Alaska Native peers at the CSWE American Indian Social Work Educators' meeting in 2015 was a special honor that I know he will cherish. His hard work through many years at his universities, in curriculum, and research provide a substantial legacy. But perhaps equally important was his vocal advocacy and presence at the national level, which will leave a lasting mark. We know that as American Indian/Alaska Native social work educators, so much of our work is educating our non-Indigenous colleagues and students on an almost daily basis about who we are as Indigenous Peoples on our own homelands. Even though Mike is retired, if I listen carefully, I can still hear his voice, supporting,

educating and challenging to make things better for us all.

### Reference

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**About the Author:** Priscilla A. Day (Anishinaabe), MSW, Ed.D. Department Chair, Social Work and Director, Center for Regional and Tribal Child Welfare Studies, University of Minnesota Duluth (218-726-7221; [pdlay@d.umn.edu](mailto:pdlay@d.umn.edu)).