

Dan Was There for Us

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Abstract: In partnership with his spouse and social work colleague, Dr. Marge Edwards, Dr. E. Daniel (“Dan”) Edwards (Yurok) developed and directed the American Indian Social Work Career Training Program at the University of Utah. This program recruited and successfully graduated over 300 American Indian social workers over four decades, meaningfully changing the face of social work practice in many communities. He also encouraged numerous students to pursue doctorate degrees in social work, inspiring them to conduct culturally sensitive and responsive research to help American Indian Peoples, and to teach upcoming generations of social work practitioners. He extended his patient and gentle guidance and mentorship to encourage and support non-Native students to be part of this vision as well. With wisdom, compassion, and self-deprecating humor, Dr. Edwards’ influence on social work has been transformative. Those he has touched in turn share some of the gifts he has given them, extending his influence across distance and across time. This paper recounts some of the contributions of Dr. Edwards’ career through separate narratives from four individuals whom he has influenced.

Keywords: social work education, American Indian/Alaska Native, Indigenous, First Nations, social work practice & leadership

In this reflection on the work and influence of social work educator E. Daniel “Dan” Edwards (Yurok), several narrators have shared personal recollections of his life and work. The narrators are both Native and non-Native, and their recollections span three decades. These separate narratives touch on significant events and accomplishments in Dr. Edwards’ career, while sharing a sense of the meaning of his influence on their own personal and professional development. Thus, the authors’ own stories are interwoven in these narratives, echoing Dr. Edwards’ teaching style, which frequently draws on autobiographical information as a way of both building relationships and deepening understanding. Thus, the following narratives do not follow a chronological order; in fact, the first narrative begins by recounting the occasion of an honor ceremony held for Dr. Edwards on October, 2013, in Dallas, Texas. This occasion marked the first formal award given to honor achievement by the American Indian/Alaska Native Social Work Educators Association (AIANSWEA).

Honor Song for Dan Edwards (Yurok)

On October 31, 2013, AIANSWEA members gathered for their annual meeting in Dallas, Texas. The occasion was the first “Honoring Our Elders” event held by this organization; the honoree, Dr. E. Daniel Edwards.

The room was filled and latecomers scoured the halls and nearby rooms for additional chairs to bring

to the gathering. The Bear Claw Singers, a local drum group, sat ready to play an honor song. Other social work educators joined the gathering, many opting to be late for other commitments.

The choice to honor Dan was an easy one. His long career in social work education has advanced the social work profession and touched many lives. A professor emeritus at the University of Utah, Dan Edwards retired from his full-time academic career in 2012. Dan was a strong presence at AIANSWEA meetings and a core member of the group in its early days. He had some prominent publications which were meaningful to students and practitioners. Probably his greatest single contribution was the way that he and his wife Marge shaped the American Indian Master of Social Work (MSW) program at the University of Utah, creating a supportive social work program that nurtured many Native social work students.

Dan’s consistency gave a firm foundation that supported the careers of many current social workers and educators. An honor poem written and read by AIANSWEA President Hilary Weaver gives a glimpse into his influence on us:

Dan, you were there; offering smiles and encouragement to all those around you.

From the earliest days when I attended NASW and CSWE meetings, you were there as a core member.

You published thoughtful articles on American

Indian issues when little was being printed in the social work literature.

You were there, telling our stories.

When we had an opportunity to invite a panel of senior American Indian scholars in social work academia to share challenges and strategies for survival, you were there to show us the way.

When CSWE sought a preeminent scholar to deliver the Carl Scott lecture at the APM, you were there to teach us about Hozho.

When I learned more and more about the groundbreaking work that the University of Utah was doing educating American Indian social workers, of course, you were there offering your leadership.

When I met numerous talented, young American Indian social work academics who spoke of the mentoring and guidance they received, you were the one guiding them in their work.

Although we haven't worked together directly, as my career developed I relied on your articles and even more so on seeing your friendly face at national meetings.

In my career you may have been behind the scenes but you were most definitely there.

You set the path for so many of us.

You have influenced lives and careers more than you will ever know.

I thank you for all that you have given to us over the years.

We are here because you were there.

Creating a New Path and Walking with Us

The next narrative, which includes excerpts of an interview of Dr. Edwards by the narrator, provides more of both a geographical and a chronological grounding into Dr. Edwards' career path and contributions.

There is no single word or combination of words that can fully express the honor I feel in sharing our love for Dr. Dan Edwards. Educator, mentor, student, program director, American Indian Studies Director, dancer, leader, humorist, realist, philanthropist, family man, Yurok Indian Tribal member, Indian arts connoisseur, friend – and that is the short list. It is a less daunting task to write about an individual who has such a rich history because much of it is told in his own words.

First as an undergraduate student, and now as a colleague and friend, I have known Dan over 20 years. Like many, I first met Dan in the classroom. In all of my years as a student, I have never met an individual who has so selflessly contributed to the education and promotion of underrepresented populations in social work, including women, minorities, and American Indian/Alaska Native students, staff and faculty. In conversations with Dan, as both colleague and mentor, he has always shared reflections of his life. For those who know him, you will recall this as an essential element of his teaching – Dan embraced a “life involvement model,” sharing his stories with others to illustrate an understanding of the lived experience of Indian culture. I believe his greatest contribution to Native students was promotion of social work as a lived experience, that it was about doing, not reading how to do.

Just as the Native students he recruited, Dan's adventure with the University of Utah's College of Social Work began when he entered the Master of Social Work (MSW) program. After earning the MSW in 1965, Dan moved to the San Francisco Bay area and was employed as a child welfare worker in Santa Clara County. Dan was given the American Indian cases because his supervisor felt he would be most effective with Indians. Well before the Indian Child Welfare Act (1978), Dan became aware of the different way Indian families and children were treated in the child welfare system. His observations led to his creating better group home environments for American Indian and Mexican teens in 1966-67. Dan's child welfare experience shaped his lifelong dedication in promoting culturally holistic well-being of American Indian families and their communities. Even though the counterculture movement of the 1960s was in full force around him, Dan recalls that he never got “caught up” in political movements because “it caught up to him.” He became an activist for his clients

during a turbulent time – when civil rights, the Vietnam War, and widespread social unrest and upheaval figured heavily in events on and off reservations.

He returned to Utah to work with VISTA (Volunteers In Service to America) at the University of Utah. When that organization relocated to Maryland, Dan took a job with the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) in Alaska. “I worked with 20 different Indian and Alaska Native villages as a social worker and community organizer,” he recalls. “It was a great job. I always carried a weapon and survival gear in case the bush pilots’ (planes) went down. With this weapon I could survive a while.” On these village treks, Dan stayed with Indian or Alaska Native families or in tribal offices. Once he slept on the pool table in a ‘rec’ hall. Dan felt that in order to be an effective social work change agent, he needed to be a part of the cultural community as well as work within the BIA system. Five years after earning his MSW and working in diverse Indian communities, Dan was offered a position with the Western Region Indian Alcoholism Training Center, a new program at the University of Utah. Returning to Salt Lake City once again, Dan brought with him a passion to attack the issues of alcohol and drug use and abuse, child welfare, and family abuse and neglect (to name a few) that he had seen in American Indian and Alaska Native families, agencies, and communities.

Dan obtained the American Indian Social Work Career Training Program grant because of this awareness that Indian social workers were needed to provide valuable, professional approaches to problem solving. As he explains, “People were more conscious of American Indian issues, as well as those facing African Americans, Latinos and other peoples of color. American Indian people needed social workers on their reservations who understood their cultures and spoke their languages. Some American Indians were initially resistant to the idea of pursuing graduate degrees at universities some distance from their homes, but they soon found that they could achieve in these settings and they adjusted to the academic environment and encouraged other American Indians to seek MSW degrees as well... in order to bring change to their communities it was good to have a social work education.”

With the support of the training grant in 1970, Dan launched one of the first graduate social work education support programs for American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) students in the country. By its fourth decade, this program had graduated over 300 AI/AN students with either a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) or Master of Social Work (MSW) degree, and eight students had obtained doctorate degrees. At one point in its history, the program had graduated nearly a quarter of all AI/AN MSWs in the United States (Edwards, 1976). Also of note, well over half of all students supported by the program were women. This program’s start and enduring success markedly influenced both social work education and social work practice. The majority of the early American Indian graduates returned to reservations and filled social work positions as clinicians, community organizers and administrators in tribal, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Indian Health Service and state and private agencies. Many have also served as tribal chairs, on tribal councils and in other tribal leadership positions.

In addition to the early cohorts’ successes, there were other gains. According to Dan, “Higher education became intergenerational. It broke the poverty revolving door.” The students Dan and his wife and academic partner, Dr. Marge Edwards, recruited eventually sent their children to college. “We have had as many as two and three generations of students from the same family attend the College of Social Work and many families have multiple generations enrolled in a variety of higher education programs at numerous universities.” Dan’s work was transformative organizationally and systemically, and he is characteristically modest about these achievements. From a poor family himself, he is also equally cognizant that the pathway to education he helped create for the students in turn became a pathway out of poverty for many of his students and their families.

Dan completed his Doctorate of Social Work (DSW) degree and continued to work with Marge in furthering the goals of the American Indian Social Work Career Training Program. Dan contributed to our early understandings of the needs of American Indian and Alaska Native communities through his scholarly works on the cultural aspects of American Indians and alcoholism and treatment (Edwards, 1977; Edwards 1980), history of Indian policies and social service delivery (Edwards, 1976; Edwards & Edwards, 1977), as well as his contributions to early development of

successful recruitment and retention of American Indian/Alaska Native college students (Edwards, 1977; Edwards & Smith, 1979; Edwards & Smith, 1981).

His life experiences and research with Marge contributed to creating a program and environment with a strong family component. Dan's eyes twinkled as we talked together about the early days of the program: "We had activities for families and special social work group experiences for their children where we helped the young people learn about their own tribes and the cultural activities of other tribal groups. We led discussions about American Indians – their cultures and heritage, and that it was all right to be Indian; and to be proud of their own tribal heritage." In many respects these activities were similar to what they would be learning on their home reservations had their parents not been enrolled at the University of Utah.

While Dan and his wife provided a warm and welcoming home to American Indian and Alaska Native students across North America at the University of Utah College of Social Work, their hospitality was inclusive of all. This influence reverberated beyond the confines of their program, as illustrated by the following narrative.

Gently Guiding Us to a Better Path

The next narrative is shared by a non-Native social work educator. In her recollections, she notes how deeply both her sense of identity as a social worker, and her career trajectory, have been molded by her fortunate choice of Dan as one of her role models.

It would be difficult to think of a single individual who has done more with regard to social work education and American Indian/Alaska Native Peoples. But the story does not end there. It is indeed difficult for me to think of a single individual who has done more with regard to social work education (period).

When I began my MSW studies at the University of Utah in the late 80's, our class of 32 individuals included a robust cohort of 7 Native American students from all over the country. While fully integrated into all aspects of the MSW program, they also received additional academic, social, cultural,

and other supports through the program that Dan founded back in 1970, the American Indian Social Work Career Training Program (known in short as the AI Program). Dan and his wife Marge ably recruited students, administered the program, and did everything humanly possible to provide a warm and welcoming new home for these students, many of whom had never been to Salt Lake City until they moved to obtain their graduate degrees.

At times the non-Indian students grumbled about the "special attention" that the American Indian students received. I listened to these conversations, and wondered if it was a good idea for these students to have a program and an identity apart from us "mainstream" students in the program. I had an informal occasion to mention to Dr. Edwards that I had heard these complaints. Dan did not directly respond to my question. Instead, he smiled at me gently, and then told me a story about a young, impoverished Yurok Indian boy from Northern California who had found himself uprooted from his home and everything he had known as he sought his first college degree in Provo, Utah – a strange new community. He laughed softly as he remembered some of the early gaffes he made in his new home, and what his classmates must have thought of him. As he talked, I felt my heart and my understanding grow together in what was an almost-physical sensation. Dan's personal and self-effacing stories always affected me that way – as if I were Dr. Seuss's cartoon Grinch suddenly feeling my heart enlarge and burst out of my chest.

The small sense of healthy shame that I also acquired in that moment prompted me to reach out and develop a friendship with Donna, a Lakota classmate from South Dakota. She shared with me some of the struggles she had faced in getting to this point in her education. She also shared what the AI Program meant to her, and what it meant to the reservation community to which she planned to return. She had experienced considerable cultural shock moving alone from a small reservation town in South Dakota to Salt Lake City. She credited the AI Program with helping her to acculturate successfully to her new environment, to manage the expectations of graduate school, and to muster the courage to reach out to and form relationships with non-Native MSW students such as myself.

Dan's influence on the curriculum, as well as the

presence of the students themselves, enriched the social work education of every MSW student in our program, and the presence of those students transformed me in very personal ways as well. As a Utah native, I found I had little understanding of the history of the land that my more recent ancestors inhabited, nor of the ongoing and unconscionable injustices faced by Indigenous Peoples in my state, region, country, and continent. My exposure to that knowledge and to the Native American students helped me to be a very different social worker in all of the practice positions— both micro and macro — that I worked in following graduation, and, indeed, continues to shape my career path and interests in very marked ways.

Dan became an important advisor to me when I returned for my doctoral education in Social Work at the University of Utah in 2000, mentoring me in my job at the Social Research Institute, where I worked on grant projects involving the Southern Ute Reservation, the Paiute Tribe of Utah, and Native American Peoples residing in Salt Lake’s urban core. He was a marvelous mentor whose humor and gentle guidance helped me to integrate important life lessons into my world view and remain resilient in the face of many challenges.

Rarely did Dan give direct advice. My work on reservation communities deepened my understanding that Dan’s incorporation of stories — frequently autobiographical and always gently humorous and self-deprecating — comprised a pedagogical method that reflected and honored his cultural heritage. Direct advice was rare, and akin to the admonition of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Dan’s imparted wisdom was also like the snow: “...the softer it falls, the longer it dwells upon, and the deeper it sinks into the mind.”

Such lessons I drew from stories shared many years ago still easily come to mind. Recounting a humorous story about “White folks who go Native” and hang out in reservation communities hoping to be accepted, I am reminded, “Be yourself. A phony will be spotted from a mile off.” Yet more stories remind me to be mindful of when to be more relationship-centered than task-centered.

In a favorite yarn, Dan was mistaken for an actor by a gentleman in a bar at a conference hotel in

Hawai‘i. Dan was wearing his characteristic boots, bolo tie, and Western-style hat, and no doubt looked the part. He was quite willing to pull his accoster’s leg, admitting that he may indeed have seen Dan in the film (or not-so-famous documentary), “Sanpete County” (a rural county in central Utah). I cannot recall if he actually gave the man his autograph on a napkin, but I believe it entirely possible. The practice lesson? “If you can’t poke fun at yourself, you’ll have a hard time working in a reservation community. Be glad when you get teased, because it means they may be starting to like you.”

After many years in higher education, I have often thought about the “ripple effects” going back so many years ago, knowing what a different — and better — social worker and teacher I am because of him. This understanding was even clearer to me three years ago, as I drove out to Sitting Bull College in North Dakota to teach a cohort of Native American students an Introduction to Social Work class in a new partnership developed between Sitting Bull College on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation and the University of North Dakota. During that drive time, I re-visited many things learned from Dan, and enjoyed sharing those stories with my colleagues who traveled with me. In ways, it felt like coming full circle and that sometimes he was there in the car with me. His gentle influence will continue to be felt throughout my career as a social work educator, and throughout my life.

Lighting the Path

This final narrative below is shared by one of Dan’s mentees who was encouraged to pursue a doctoral degree. There will likely be recognizable elements of this story for many people who shared similar transformative moments with him in their lives and decisions.

It would be rare to find an American Indian social worker who has not been greatly impacted, either directly or indirectly, by Dan Edwards. My experience was no different. In the late 1990s, I entered the University of Utah’s MSW program with the intent of working with at-risk youth. I had spent a semester working with a wilderness youth program and then in a school setting with this population, and I thought I had identified my future career path.

A few years prior to that, my “Indian” grandmother

had moved in with my parents and I began to hear stories of her youth. I always knew I had an Indian grandmother but Native culture and traditions were not a big part of my growing up. As it turned out, much of that was lost when my grandmother's Indian mother passed away when she was very young. As a result, I always knew I had Winnebago heritage, but it was not a part of my growing up experience.

As I began the MSW program and was exploring which classes to take, I noticed a "Social Work with American Indians" course taught by Dan Edwards. I thought this class might be an interesting elective, so I signed up for the course. Little did I know at that time that the direction of my life would be changed by this wonderful professor. During that course, my desire to work with and help my maternal ancestors' people began percolating. Dan's knowledge and passion for American Indians were contagious. His stories of growing up in Northern California and doing social work practice with Native populations were engrossing.

I still remember one of my conversations with Dan. He asked me what I wanted to do in my future social work career, and I mentioned something like working with at-risk youth. He asked me about my Indian background and I was able to tell him about my Winnebago "Indian" grandmother. Her Indian mother passed away when she was young, and she was sent to the Haskell Indian Boarding School in Kansas. He then said, "Gordon, we need help. We need people like you to work in Indian communities and find better ways to help our people."

Over the semester, I was fortunate to have a number of these types of conversations with Dan about my future. Instead of working with American Indians in a direct practice setting, which he said was greatly needed and desirable, Dan planted a seed that over the next few months would grow into a life-changing decision. He told me that very few American Indians were going on for doctorates so they could study and research topics important to Native populations. He suggested that I go on for a PhD so that I could make an impact on a larger number of American Indians through research that could affect policy and practice decisions.

Up until that point, I had not thought of going on

and getting a doctorate. But something within me resonated with what Dan had said about this need. I began looking into PhD programs and with the help of Dan and a few other professors at the University of Utah, some of whom had graduated from the University of California at Berkeley, I applied and was accepted to Berkeley's PhD program.

His encouragement has made all the difference in my life's career path. After graduating with my PhD, I was fortunate to work with another exceptional American Indian scholar, Eddie Brown, but Dan was instrumental in helping me on my journey. I am sure my story is not unlike many others who have had their paths lighted by Dan's wisdom and encouragement. He and Marge have been the bedrock for American Indians in the social work profession and continue to impact Natives into the third and fourth generation.

Taking a Moment to Look Back Down the Path

Dan and Marge Edwards' work with the University of Utah's AI Program transformed the individual lives of hundreds of students and their families. Dan's career as a consummate pathfinder transformed the institution in which he was embedded, and helped to change the face of practice by educating and mentoring hundreds of American Indian and Alaska Native social workers who have practiced in and serve in leadership roles in agencies and communities both within and outside reservation settings – roles that were previously filled almost exclusively by non-Native (i.e., "white") individuals.

Dan has built caring relationships with hundreds of BSW, MSW, and Ph.D. students over the course of his career, yet he can readily recall who they are, where they came from, what their stories were, and where they are now. Understanding this is to begin to grasp something of the deeper practice wisdom of his career. While much of his work has been profoundly organizational and systemic, it is always deeply personal and relationship-based (yet never self-serving).

In this reflective narrative about the career of Dr. Dan Edwards, we have woven together the voices of varied individuals who were profoundly influenced by him at different stages of their careers. Dan is himself a consummate storyteller, and the memorable stories that his students and colleagues could recount about

him would no doubt fill several volumes. We hope that these shared stories offer some insights into the quietly powerful and enduring influence this individual has had on the people and the practice of social work and social work education. Of course, as we share our journeys we acknowledge there is not one path, but many – and Dan was and is there for us, walking with us.

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