

John Red Horse, Indigenous Social Work Educator Elder

Priscilla A. Day and Evie Campbell

Abstract: This is a narrative reflection on one Indigenous elder in the social work profession who has influenced many other social work educators, both Native and non-Native. In his early years, Dr. John Red Horse worked as a social worker in the Indigenous community but for most of his career, he was an academic in social work and American Indian Studies programs. His works and legacy have proven to be an inspiration for those who follow.

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Dr. John Red Horse is an enrolled member of the Cherokee Nation who spent his childhood growing up in Northern California (personal communication, November 13, 2015). During Dr. Red Horse's career, he often wrote about the roles that elders play in the American Indian community. When he was engaged in writing about elders, he probably did not think that some day he would be one of those revered elders about whom he wrote. As this article demonstrates, John played the role of reservoir of cultural information about Indigenous communities and transmitter of Indigenous knowledge. Many American Indian social work educators have cited in their own research the works of Dr. Red Horse. He is most notably known for his work to articulate the role of extended family, the policies designed to destroy American Indian families, and strategies for American Indian family preservation. His *Family Preservation: Concepts in American Indian Communities* (2000) has been widely cited. He also wrote about the need to engage with American Indian communities long before it was popular. His booklet, "To Build a Bridge: Working with American Indian Communities" (2000) provides key principles and strategies to "create cooperative relationships with American Indian communities" (2000, p. 45).

Dr. Red Horse generously shared his knowledge and considerable intellect to enrich and deepen an understanding of American Indian families and the role Indigenous scholars should play in working in collaboration with Indigenous communities. He often reminded Indigenous educators about their responsibility to advocate in systems that do not necessarily welcome Indigenous voices. John served as a role model, paving a path so that others do not have to struggle as much as he did. This article will illustrate some of the many enduring contributions of Dr. Red Horse.

Dr. Red Horse began his education as a student in the Social Welfare Program at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) from 1967-1969, where he assumed a leadership role as the Chairman of the Steering Committee to develop the American Indian Studies Program on the UCLA campus (personal communication, November 13, 2015). The American Indian students wanted an American Indian Studies program that would reflect and honor American Indian intellectual knowledge. He went on to work with the local American Indian community to develop a curriculum for the program. John followed his instinct and stayed true to his upbringing, involving the community in his work. He always sought out the community for input, knowledge and support whether through formal focus groups or attending American Indian community events where he would "visit" with community members to get their insights.

In 1969, Dr. Red Horse served as the Director of the Native Indian Youth Corps in Wisconsin where he mentored undergraduate students from around the country at the Clyde Warrior Memorial Institute. There, students learned about American Indian history, tribal sovereignty and leadership (personal communication, November 13, 2015).

Working for American Indian communities was a theme that repeated throughout his career. Dr. Red Horse believed that "if you are going to make decisions for American Indians, you need to be a part of that community" (personal communication, November 13, 2015). He added, "Let us self-rule and self-govern" (personal communication, November 13, 2015). He actively worked to make sure American Indian issues were included at the universities where he worked, instead of just witnessing inequity and standing by without trying to change things. He did this by voicing his opinions and doing his homework so he could argue from an informed perspective.

Dr. Red Horse came to the University of Minnesota Duluth (UMD) in 1990, serving as the dean of the College of Liberal Arts. After serving as dean, he became a professor and Chair of the American Indian Studies program. John said he wanted to go back to being a professor; something he loved (personal communication, November 13, 2015). Even though his tenure home was American Indian Studies, John was involved in social work education at UMD by teaching classes and working with the Center for Regional and Tribal Child Welfare Studies, housed in the Department of Social Work.

In 2006, he received a Distinguished Alumnus award from the College of Education and Human Development, University of Minnesota Twin Cities for his work in Indian Child Welfare and Family Development (personal communication, November, 13, 2015). As part of the college centennial celebration, they selected individuals whose work in the world contributed to the college's reputation and impact. The University of Minnesota (n.d.) honored Dr. John Red Horse:

... Whose work in curriculum development has deeply influenced the training of professionals who interact with American Indian families. He created ah-bi-noo-gee, a family services model specifically for American Indian extended family systems, and the first program to emphasize the cultural and structural integrity of Indian families. This led to a national conference and new federal funding criteria based on strength-based cultural principles.

Dr. Red Horse retired in May 2010 from the University of Minnesota Duluth (UMD), Department of American Indian Studies in the College of Liberal Arts and now enjoys living in his retirement home in Arizona (personal communication, November 13, 2015).

Last year, at the 18th Annual American Indian Alaska Native Social Work Educator's meeting in Tampa, Florida, Dr. Red Horse was honored for his lifetime achievement in the field of social work. American Indian social work educators wrote the following statements, which were read at the meeting.

One American Indian educator summed up John as a

“mentor...someone who provides one-to-one guidance...but much more than that.” John was described as “someone who has been through the various challenges of academia and has lived to tell the tale.” One colleague stated the experience of many of us in American Indian social work education:

In my early days of teaching and writing, I would scour the social work literature for mentions of American Indian people and issues. There wasn't much that was being published in those days. You were our voice when most social work conversations failed to include us. I drew on your work to inform my teaching and writing. What I noticed most recently is that in various chapters of “Social Issues in Contemporary Native America: Reflections from Turtle Island,” authors drew on your work. Your scholarship was cited more often than any other author, regardless of the subject of the chapter. Your influence is broad. You are the one we cite.

Dr. Red Horse was noted as someone who “raised his voice to speak on important issues.” This colleague went on to recall:

In the old E. F. Hutton commercials from the 1970s, the announcer says, “When E. F. Hutton talks, people listen.” John served in this role for many of us. You have played a role in raising your voice to speak on important issues even if it is a dissenting opinion...you have a lasting and influential legacy.

One former colleague of John's spoke of the role John played throughout her professional career. She said:

When I first met John, he seemed like a big time, larger than life person. In my early 20's, I had few professional American Indian role models and none that had doctorate degrees. John represented an “out of reach” ideal of an American Indian person that had achieved far greater than I ever could. Over the years, I got to know John and he served as a mentor to help me achieve my own doctorate degree and professional accomplishments. As time passed, I met more and more people that John provided both the aspiration and the support to achieve their goals.

She went on to say:

John has always been a humble man who has been a tireless advocate for children, families, and the American Indian community. He worked for many years as a staunch community advocate and then entered academia where he served as both faculty member and dean. While I knew John before he was dean, it was while he was in his deanship that he helped me when I was an MSW student. My financial aid had been messed up and the university counselor would not assist me. I went to John, even though he was not the dean in my college, and he immediately called the financial aid director. Within a day my financial aid was straightened out and I was able to concentrate on school without worrying about how I was going to make it financially. When I became a tenure track faculty, John invited me to write with him on several projects with the National Indian Child Welfare Association. Through those projects, I met many other American Indian social work professors and national leaders in American Indian child welfare. Many of these contacts have lasted throughout my career. Without John, those doors would not have been opened.

One Native scholar shared that while working on research projects with John traveling to other states, it was inevitable that they would run into people who had been John's students or former clients. He was always greeted warmly and with deep respect. She said:

On these travels, I would marvel at John's ability to say just the right thing to help take us to a deeper level in conversations on policy and practice issues. John's ability to recite academic and experiential worldviews is exceptional. It was an education just to be able to hear him interact in the many public venues where I had the opportunity to watch and learn from him.

One former colleague who was a close friend of John's said:

John is someone I could ask for advice on any topic. He provided guidance to me in my personal life and served as a mentor in my professional career. His best role in my life is

when he would be my "brother" by not letting me off-the-hook or by saving me from a serious fall.

Dr. Red Horse was touched by the expression of gratitude from his colleagues during this gathering and thought the best contribution he could make was, "being cited" (personal communication, November 13, 2015). He also realized that he was helping students through his work as well.

As a Native scholar (and co-author of this article), Evie Campbell, Assistant Professor at the University of Minnesota Duluth Department of Social Work and a former colleague of Dr. John Red Horse, explained how he influenced her teaching career:

In my professional life, I was fortunate to attend graduate school where there were many Indigenous scholars for me to connect with and learn from. Due to the informal mentoring I received as a graduate student, I was encouraged to apply for a teaching position. I was offered an assistant professor position and was fortunate to have an opportunity to interact with John Red Horse who worked with the Center for Regional and Tribal Child Welfare Studies in the Department of Social Work. I was pleased to learn that John knew and worked with my father and John was always ready to tell a good story or two about their time together. Dr. Red Horse is considered a leader and helper in the Indigenous community and by social work educators. He has influenced my work by providing a foundation for how to work with American Indian communities as well as the issues American Indian families face.

A colleague and friend of John's (and co-author on this article), Dr. Priscilla Day, Chair of the Department of Social Work and Director of the Center for Regional and Tribal Child Welfare Studies asked one of her former students and about his memories of John. He said:

Some of my fondest memories of Dr. Red Horse are when another student and I were first on as staff at the Center for Regional and Tribal Child Welfare Studies at the University of Minnesota Duluth. We would have weekly sit-downs with John. We'd come prepared with an agenda and hardly ever covered anything on it. I always appreciated how funny he was during those sit-downs but probably didn't

appreciate how much I learned. He always had an ability to put the work that we were discussing into a larger context in interesting ways that I hadn't considered. Few people that I have worked with are able to bridge theory and practice in as eloquent a way as John. Dr. Red Horse could have very easily and understandably not given us the time of day when we were students and staff but he always spent the time to chat with us and travel with us to various meetings and, thinking back, that was a huge gift.

John made everyone feel important and valued. He did that by making time for and acknowledging the contributions of others. In his own way, he imparted knowledge through stories and provided important context that sometimes didn't make sense until a later time or after students had more experience in the American Indian community.

While John was passionate, he also was able to put things into perspective. One colleague described that on one occasion she was quite upset and wanted to do something brash. John advised her that it might be more prudent in the long run to think carefully and to act but in a less impetuous way. She says:

It was a lesson that I never forgot and I still use today when I am feeling like striking back against some real or imagined injustice. Always act, but do so in a way that enables the conversation to move forward instead of stopping it. For these and many other lessons, I am deeply indebted to John.

As you can see, Dr. Red Horse played a significant role in many lives, both Native and non-Native. He generously shared his time, his expertise, and his humor and friendship with many. He left a lasting legacy in those he taught, worked with and touched with the many articles he published. There are surprisingly few American Indian social work educators. According to the CSWE Task Force on

Native Americans in Social Work Education (2010), there were less than 50 in 2007.

Dr. Red Horse has provided enduring scholarship to many and nurturing and role modeling to a lucky few. His lessons included: take risks, speak up, be prepared by knowing at least as much or more than your non-Native colleagues, be true to yourself, never lose your sense of humor, and leave a path for those who come after. Dr. John Red Horse has left a visible path and is truly in a class of his own as an American Indian intellectual.

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- About the Authors:** 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; pday@d.umn.edu); Evie Campbell (Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe), MSW, Assistant Professor, University of Minnesota Duluth Department of Social Work (218-726-8705; ecampbel@d.umn.edu).