UST Women’s History Project

Women’s Work: Women in Leadership in Social Work

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St. Catherine University-University of St. Thomas School of Social Work
Introduction

While the University of St. Thomas has only been a co-educational institution since 1977, women have played important leadership roles throughout the life of the University. In 2014 the University of St. Thomas Women Faculty Leadership Council put forth a call for proposals to document these women leaders through the University’s history and their contributions to its success. This article is the result of one of those grants, presenting the accomplishments of three critical leaders in the development and growth of the School of Social Work.

As a historically male-orientated institution, the gender of the leadership in the School of Social Work is noteworthy. Traditionally, the profession of social work is female dominated with far more women than men in its ranks. However, leadership in social work education and agency administration has consistently been male dominated, with few women serving as agency administrators, professors and deans of schools of social work. Leadership at the School of Social Work at the University of St. Thomas did not follow this trend. Since its inception in the late 1960’s, the Social Work program at the University of St. Thomas and St. Catherine University has been led by women. Women have led the program throughout its development from a small undergraduate major to a comprehensive, successful and influential School of Social Work that now offers degrees at the Baccalaureate, Masters and Doctorate levels.

This article is the second part of a two part project documenting the women leaders in the School of Social Work at the University of St. Thomas. This article serves as a compliment to the first part of the project, a three-segment video highlighting the
three University of St. Thomas women leaders of the School of Social Work through. The three leaders include Dean and full professor Dr. Barbara Shank, Professor and Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs Dr. Angeline Barretta-Herman (retired), and Dr. Janice Andrews-Schenk (deceased). These individuals were chosen because of their strategic leadership and extensive contributions to both the School of Social Work, University of St. Thomas, and to social work education. All three have served as models and mentors, influencing continued leadership of women within the University systems, the School of Social Work, and the profession. The video was completed in collaboration with journalist Greta Cunningham. Ms. Cunningham conducted all interviews, narrated each segment, and served as the producer of the entire video. The video segments are based on a collection of documents and photos combined with eight interviews with current and former colleagues and students.

**Women in Social Work Education**

Women make up the majority of faculty and students in social work education. As of 2013, nearly 70% of full time social work faculty were women, with women making up 72% of part time faculty (Council on Social Work Education, 2013). While there has consistently been more female faculty than male faculty, according to Alvarez, Collins, Graber and Lazzari (2008) it wasn’t until the early 2000s that women outnumbered men in positions of leadership in departments and schools of social work. Alvarez at al. (2008) notes that more recent studies show that leadership positions are now primarily held by women. From the time of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) development in 1952, eight of the nineteen presidents and five of the eleven executive directors have been women (Alvarez et al. 2008). In addition, women have been underrepresented in
social work conference planning, conference presentations, publications, and as tenured and high-ranking faculty (Di Palma, Topper & Cruz, 1999; Alvarez, et al. 2008; Sakamoto, Anastas, McPhail, and Colarossi 2008). While there has been some improvement, these differences between men and women in status, salaries, and scholarly activities highlight that while social work is known as a “women’s profession”, it has been difficult to emerge as a woman leader.

**St. Catherine University-University of St. Thomas School of Social Work**

The St. Catherine University-University of St. Thomas School of Social Work is unique. Dr. Judith Miller established the social work major at the College of St. Catherine in 1969. In 1974, the College of St. Catherine and St. Thomas College collaborated to establish a joint social work major, which received its initial accreditation that same year. The joint major grew to become a joint department in 1976 and added a weekend college option in 1979. In 1990 the department added a Master’s in Social Work program, with an emphasis on clinical practice and in 1996 the department became a School of Social Work. Most recently, the School, in 2014, added the Doctorate in Social Work with an emphasis on teaching as practice. As the only remaining joint program between the two Universities, the School of Social Work continues to demonstrate a unique ability to navigate the complexities of existing as a partnership between two institutions simultaneously growing its programs, enrollment, and engagement with the community. It has been powerful women that have navigated this collaboration and through its development have nurtured women leaders.
Dr. Miller began the legacy of women in leadership in the School of Social Work with several powerful women following in her footsteps. While numerous women faculty have demonstrated excellence in teaching, scholarship, service, and professional engagement, three faculty emerged to step into program, university, higher education, and professional leadership roles. It is these women who have created the legacy of women in leadership in the St. Catherine University-University of St. Thomas School of Social Work and who are the focus of this work.

Three Women Leaders at St. Thomas

While one could create a long list of women in the School of Social Work who exemplified leadership and excellence in teaching, scholarship, service, and the profession, the scope of this project led to highlighting three women specifically from the University of St. Thomas.

Barbara Shank, MSW, Ph.D., LICSW Dean and full professor Barbara Shank joined the University of St. Thomas in 1978, soon after becoming the department chair. She navigated the creation of the MSW program in 1990 and the department’s transition to a School of Social Work in 1996. Recently, she led the School of Social Work in the creation of the first DSW program in the nation to focus on Teaching as Practice. She works extensively in both the national and international arenas of social work education, representing the University, the School and the profession. Dr. Shank serves as the Chair of the Board of the Council on Social Work Education (2013 – 2016), the national accrediting body for social work education.
Dr. Shank attributes her entry into social work to learning about the Elizabethan Poor Laws as a student at Macalester College. She appreciated the emphasis on taking care of the poor and vulnerable and decided at that point to make it part of her life’s work. In 1978, at the urging of a colleague, Shank applied for a two-year temporary position. She took a leave of absence from her social work position with Ramsey County when offered the teaching position. She states that she took the leave of absence so she, “could go back in case I didn’t like it or they didn’t like me.” She goes on to say, “I came and knew within five minutes I wasn’t going back to the county. This is what I wanted to do.” Shank has been here ever since.

Dr. Shank was drawn to leadership positions from very early on in her academic career. In 1981 she was named Department Chair and in 1990 she was named the Associate Dean of the School of Education, Professional Psychology and Social Work, and upon its establishment in 1996, she became the Dean of the School of Social Work. Additionally, Dr. Shank maintains a high profile in the broader social work education and professional community. From 2002-2004 Dr. Shank was elected President of the Minnesota Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers and she has served on the Catholic Charities USA Board of Directors since 2006. She was elected to serve as the Chair of the Board of Directors of CSWE in 2013 and was re-elected to a second term in 2015. She is the first person in the history of the organization elected to two consecutive terms. In addition, Dr. Shank has served as the President of the Board of Directors of the International Consortium for Social Development. The National Association of Social Workers named Dr. Shank to its prestigious list of Social Work Pioneers in 2015 honoring her many accomplishments in social work education and her
service to the profession. These are just a few of the many leadership roles that Dr. Shank has participated in throughout the years that highlight her local, national, and international presence.

Those interviewed for this project described Dr. Shank as determined and as a visionary, in particular, holding the vision for, and then building the School of Social Work and its programs. The words used to describe Dr. Shank included pioneering, playful, builder, and steward. Her approach to her School of Social Work colleagues was also mentioned in that she hires great faculty who she encourages and expects to excel. A former student remarked that Dr. Shank continuously noticed and attended to her path as she transitioned from student to practitioner to educator. She was also described as having her finger on the pulse and being connected on the local, national, and international levels. One interviewee spoke of Dr. Shank’s putting her heart and soul into her work.

Angeline Barretta-Herman, MSW, Ph.D., LICSW Professor Emerita Barretta-Herman came to the St. Catherine University-University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in 1991 after ten years as professor in New Zealand and went on to serve as the MSW Program Director from 1996 – 2001. In 2001 she was appointed the Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs for the University of St. Thomas and served in administration until her retirement in 2011. Dr. Barretta-Herman is a professor emerita and currently teaches adjunct in the DSW program in the School of Social Work.

Throughout her career Dr. Barretta-Herman has engaged in a variety of leadership roles at the local, national, and international levels. From 1996-2000 she served as Co-
Chair of the Women’s Interest Group and Board Member of International Association of Schools of Social Work. From 1999-2001 she served as an Executive Committee and Board member for the Minnesota Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers. In 2000 she served as Chair of the Standing Committee on the World Census and on the Board of the International Association of School of Social Work. In 2006 she was appointed to the National Commission on Global Social Work for the Council on Social Work Education. While these are just a few examples of her engagement and leadership, they highlight Dr. Barretta-Herman’s commitment to her work and her international perspective on social work education and the profession.

Dr. Barretta-Herman’s former colleagues and students describe her as a fabulous teacher who is reflective, engaging, serious about her work, and who brings a unique international and intercultural perspective that creates a larger context for social work. Her skills as a social worker were integral in her success as a University administrator. She is described as a great collaborator with a passion for research and the ability to engage others in work and collaboration. One interview specifically mentioned Dr. Barretta-Herman’s role as a pioneer in stepping forward as a woman to serve as an administrator, positions often held by men, at St. Thomas and that she was someone who helped pave the way for the first and current President of the University of St. Thomas, Dr. Julie Sullivan.

Janice Andrews-Schenk, MSW, Ph.D. Dr. Janice Andrews-Schenk, professor in the School of Social Work from 1990 to 2005, was an accomplished teacher and a nationally recognized scholar in the areas of social welfare history, macro practice, group work, and social justice. She was one of the leading scholars on radical social work.
Prior to coming to St. Thomas, she served as a professor and program director in a social work program in southern Minnesota. While with the St. Catherine University-University of St. Thomas School of Social Work she served as Professor and Director of the off-campus MSW program. Sadly, Dr. Andrews-Schenk past away at the age of 61 in 2005.

Dr. Andrews-Schenk’s leadership was evident in her role as a scholar and her strong contributions to social work knowledge. She was prolific writer authoring numerous articles, book chapters, and books. Her scholar identity was one of her most significant roles as a woman leader and continues to influence her former colleagues and students. In addition, her passion and commitment to social group work scholarship has left a legacy in the School of Social Work in the form of an endowed scholarship available annually to a graduate student with a particular interest in social justice and group work.

From 1993-2005 Dr. Andrews-Schenk served in a variety of roles with the Association for the Advancement of Social Work with Groups including being a founding member of the Minnesota Chapter as well as Chair of the Social Action Committee and Vice President of the International Board. She served on the Board of the Minnesota Coalition for Licensed Social Workers from 1990-1992 and Chair of the Coalition from 1998-2002. Dr. Andrews-Schenk also served in several leadership positions as a Board Member of the Minnesota Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers including President from 1994-1996, and from whom she received a lifetime achievement award from in 2005. Dr. Andrews-Schenk is the author of dozens of articles and book chapters, co-author of a seminal text on radical social work, *The Road Not Taken: A History of Radical Social Work in the United States* (date), and author of
two texts, perhaps most notably her final publication, *Rebellious Spirit: Gisela Knopka* (date). This work pushed the social work profession to reexamine its roots as radical social change makers. Never complacent with the status quo, she challenged students and colleagues in their desire for clinical knowledge and direct practice to maintain the social justice nature of social work practice.

Dr. Andrews-Schenk is described by her colleagues as a consummate, quintessential, and engaged scholar. Former students describe her as one of the best teachers they ever had and highlighted her emphasis on developing critical thinking skills and asking more questions. Both former students and colleagues alike highlighted her attention and commitment to examining all sides of an issue, theory, or idea. Dr. Andrews-Schenk was particularly known for her passion for social group work, macro practice, social justice, and her commitment to scholarship related to women. It was noted that she really believed in the power of in impacting lives for the better. A former student and later colleague noted her encouragement, support, collaboration, and mentorship in scholarly writing, teaching, and professional presentations. Another colleague noted that Dr. Andrews-Schenk was a historian who understood the value of history and telling people’s stories. She was described as someone who brought the head and the heart together around issues that matter to us all.

**Conclusion**

While there are many more women to be recognized as leaders in the St. Catherine University-University of St. Thomas School of Social Work, these three women exemplify the spirit of women leaders that the University of St. Thomas
Women’s History Project aims to capture. These three women embodied a passion for social work, education, and the common good. They stepped forward into roles and identities as leaders who collaborated, mentored, and engaged colleagues, students, and communities in local, national, and international spheres. Each one of them has contributed to a legacy of women leaders as visionaries, builders, teachers, mentors, and scholars.
References


