



*Diana Ming Chan*  
陳維明

# DIANA WEY MING CHAN

## From Isolation to Influence

The saying goes that it's better to light a candle than to curse the darkness. But what if you're so poor you barely have the means to buy a candle?

Born of immigrant parents in the Chinese community of San Francisco, I reflect on my life as different in many ways from most second-generation Americans. Now in our senior years, my husband and I have been able to donate \$500,000 toward a community effort that represents my heartfelt dedication to helping children and their families. Our goal is to make the total amount of our donation \$1 million. By continuing to be frugal we may do this in 2003. But here I'm jumping ahead of my story, unlike Chinese storytelling where causally related events are so important.

My father immigrated from a Pearl River Delta village to San Francisco, where he held a variety of jobs. A matchmaker introduced him to my mother who had left China believing she would work as a seamstress but instead was sold to a brothel. Cameron House, a mission in Chinatown, rescued and educated her. I never knew her as she died when I was 18 months old.

Ill-equipped to care for a small child, my father packed me off to Cameron House's "baby cottage" until I was about five years old. After that I was placed in a strict and repressive Methodist orphanage. I still have distinct memories of feeling depressed and alone. The next stage of life I spent my days with father in his store and nights with a child caretaker. As I reflect on it, what an experience that was! The woman whose name I never knew but whom I called Granny (in Chinese) introduced me to the Chinese opera. I went by myself every night for at least three years. She used those times to engage in her opium addiction. I learned Chinese history and values in my rapt attention to the performances.

Emotional emancipation became my survival mode at age 11, when I placed an ad for a job in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. In quick succession, I had jobs as a house cleaner, a babysitter, and a cleaner in a weight-reduction salon, but lost each very quickly because of lack of skills and experience. Back in the house of my father, I was forced into an isolated existence, apart from father, my stepmother, her relatives, and four stepbrothers. Yet, in some significant ways my father was a fairy godmother in his insistence that I attend Chinese language school and practice my calligraphy, thus becoming grounded in my heritage. From him I came to recognize my minority status ("inferior"), the importance of education as a way out, and that feelings are not to be expressed. Being so alone empowered me and impelled me to take care of myself and make a life on my own.

As a teenager during World War II, I worked as a nursing assistant in a hospital and in a medical laboratory on weekends and after school. While in college at the University of California at Berkeley, I had figured out that I could live with a family

and get room and board in exchange for housework and child care. One would think that the hospital experience would have launched me into a career in medicine. But I disliked its authoritarian nature and gravitated to social work and the opportunities to work with families. Eventually I served as director of services for adults at the YWCA and then ran a neighborhood recreation program. The impetus for my interest in social work was the realization that one can bring change to people's lives.

Married by then, my husband and I pursued graduate work at the University of Minnesota, where the virtues of group work were reinforced in my practicum experiences. My husband obtained a teaching degree and we settled in California. I attribute much of my joy in life to him, an emotionally generous person who was 14 years older than I. On a sabbatical, which we chose to spend traveling in Europe with our two children, an automobile accident resulted in his death. A revival of my youthful resourcefulness saw me through the difficult years ahead.

As a widow, I returned to Cameron House, where I worked for 17 years as the only Chinese speaker in social services. I taught social work skills to paraprofessionals, taught parenting classes in schools, and served as an instructor in social work

methods at San Francisco State University's School of Social Welfare. Eventually I wrote a successful proposal for a Family Services Agency to be established in Chinatown. The project encompassed family life education, after-school tutoring, a club for children, and a monthly family event—a holistic approach to serving kids and their families.

I remarried and again have a most supportive husband. We established an endowment, ad-

ministered by the National Association of Social Workers, with the interest providing grants to reinstate social work positions in the San Francisco Unified School District. Our money is matched by the school system itself. We have played an activist role in institutionalizing this program we call the Learning Springboard. In coalition with other community programs, we have organized the Learning Support Services Advocates. Our intent is to better serve the community through reinstating social workers and nurses in our schools. This vision is a direct outgrowth of my years of experience, when I was stretched to the limit, being assigned to work in three schools in San Francisco. Prevention of and intervention in family troubles and children's school adjustment problems are so very urgently needed.

The values I have come to cherish and have tried to instill in my own children are to be decent people, that is, to act with integrity and honor, to do no harm, to work hard, and to be giving and loving. My early life experience was devoid of love and nurture, but from my extensive work with children and families, it has become paramount to me that subsequent generations be loved, given limits, and helped to achieve.

Hers is a life transformed by purposeful activity and emotional survival instincts. Diana Ming Chan (b. 1929) was drawn to work with children and families during her student years. She worked in various roles at Cameron House, originally a mission that served a settlement house function in San Francisco. As a social worker in the Chinese sector and in the larger San Francisco community, her grounding in Chinese language and values promoted the development of suitable prevention and intervention programs and techniques. In honor of her heritage and in recognition of the unique needs of her community, she and her husband established an endowment to fund school social work positions and train school social workers in underserved San Francisco districts. She has served on numerous boards and committees bringing her gift of unique perspective and life experience.





*Michael Shernoff*

# MICHAEL SHERNOFF

## Creating Social Work's Response to the AIDS Crisis

The impetus to become a social worker had several origins. My father, a door-to-door salesman, was active in the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies in New York City. My older brother was active in the Civil Rights Movement and I followed that lead by being active in the anti-Vietnam war movement. At what is now Binghamton University, I was an early member of a gay liberation group, joined a drug peer-counseling center, and did draft counseling through the Central Committee of Conscientious Objectors. My leanings toward community activism were evident even in high school, where I organized an anti-war group that represented the school in a large demonstration in Washington, DC. After college I began teaching in Brooklyn's predominantly black poverty belt of Bedford-Stuyvesant. There I helped organize gay teachers and worked with the Gay Activist Alliance. In the course of training to work at Identity House, Gay Peer Counseling Center, in Manhattan, I met a lot of social workers and discovered my true calling.

Another guy and I were the first openly gay students to be accepted for graduate school at the State University of New York at Stony Brook social work program. We brought pressure to bear in getting students assigned to gay mental health agencies for their practicum experience. My own field work was at the Institute for Human Identity. As a master's project, I designed a mini-module course elective titled Lesbians and Gay Men, Colleagues, and Clients. It was exciting to marry the roles of community activist and organizer with my emerging therapeutic skills. My first job was in a drug treatment clinic, and I immediately began writing on my perspectives and observations. My first published article was on recreational drug use in the gay community and it attracted a lot of attention. The HIV/AIDS crisis was on the horizon.

Diego Lopez, the first clinical director of Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC)—the earliest and now oldest AIDS service organization—became a role model. We joined forces and I became a team leader of volunteers. Because the issues were personally relevant to me and I found myself working in their midst, I recognized the hazard of overidentification and, therefore, have remained in clinical supervision for the duration of my professional life. My practice partner and I developed a workshop for a GMHC conference in the mid 1980s on eroticizing safer sex, which was a hit at the Gay and Lesbian Health Conference in Washington, DC, where we presented it as well. That seemed to launch us as international experts. We wanted the workshop not to be trainer dependent, but rather available to any interested community-based organization. We also wanted it replicated and broadly used. I believe we presented it to over 15,000 men in North America in a five-year period. The tragedy of it all is that some of these great leaders with whom I collaborated had contracted HIV and died before the protective provisions were known and promulgated. My brother came from San Francisco to live with me until he died. I, too, am diagnosed as HIV-positive but have lived with it for

more than 20 years. Ironically, decades ago I had been part of a trial on Blood Hepatitis B. Blood samples were frozen, allowing latter-day testing on them. I and other activists forged ahead preparing materials such as the booklet *When a Friend has AIDS*, which was translated into nine languages. These were volunteer endeavors when I was co-director of Chelsea Psychotherapy Associates, which I founded in 1983.

In my private practice, I have always provided a sliding scale fee opportunity and have continued my work with clients whose insurance benefits have run out. At the same time, it should be recognized that affluent people have the same personal and interpersonal issues as anyone else and deserve services that are specialized and relevant to their problems. Serving that clientele has made it possible for me to help support a number of causes

that advance HIV/AIDS outreach. Moreover, my website brings opportunity for international consultations, contacts with students and professors, and dissemination of my ideas and writings. Let me mention too my gratitude to Gary Lloyd, who has made very significant contributions on the policy and planning levels as a consultant to the World Health Organization. In many respects, those of us who have pioneered in this realm of acute problem solving are a collaborative community.

Be assured, I take measures to preserve my own health and sanguine outlook, ever mindful that more than 150 of my clients have died. I do not attend funerals; I serve people while they are alive. Until the advent of current antiviral therapies, mourning was necessarily the focus of much of my direct work with clients and their family members. I make myself very available to clients and see them through their crises, which often cannot await the next appointment. Between sessions, we may have extensive telephone and email contact.

The "duty to warn" question must be addressed in AIDS/HIV treatment settings. I sought legal opinion on this and have become clear that if a client's behavior is life-threatening to another person and that client is unwilling to take appropriate steps, then I have an obligation to inform in order to protect an innocent person. Yet, I do recognize that two people who are involved in a sexual relationship both bear responsibility.

In looking back on my work, I note that there are generations of effort that have been responsive to the evolving understanding of this public health crisis. First we addressed the impact of AIDS on community, presenting information and promulgating risk-reduction guidelines. Over time, we developed and implemented a series of workshops that addressed the needs of those directly afflicted or affected. This second-generation approach addresses the interpersonal contexts of HIV/AIDS and focuses on prevention. Now we concentrate on interventions that promote coping with the psychosocial challenges of living with HIV/AIDS in the era of life-saving combination therapies that are not, however, effective for everyone.

Michael Shernoff (b. 1951) has been at the forefront of HIV/AIDS education, training, and counseling. His voluntary initiatives have brought into print a variety of useful pamphlets, more than 50 articles, and several books that have had worldwide distribution. He led social work into addressing the breach between an acute social health problem and the tools and materials to address a new class of potentially catastrophic life experiences. Shernoff maintains a private practice, an informational website, and is mental health consultant to the influential health-oriented website, theBody.com. The marriage of primary preventive efforts, secondary initiatives in developing service systems, and the tertiary work of direct therapeutic intervention represents the spectrum of social work practice applications in an emerging and critical problem area.





Barbara W. White

# BARBARA W. WHITE

## Bringing People and Ideas Together: The Dream of Unity and Consensus

Music was my life growing up. And it was my first career, as I taught music in the public schools of Jacksonville for nine years. Those were difficult times in Florida because court-ordered desegregation was being imposed. I witnessed the racial composition of every school in the county change to 70% white, 30% black—both students and teachers. The onus of being sent to another school fell on the blacks, and reassignments were done without any real preparation of students or teachers. Everybody was unhappy. For example, the black children would tend to sit to the back of the room and never speak up.

Along with my husband and two small girls, I moved back to Tallahassee, where I had grown up. I decided to pursue a new career in the helping professions. I enrolled at Florida State University, which during my youth had been entirely segregated. As a black person I would not have dared set foot on the campus then. So it felt strange to be there 13 years later as a bona fide student!

The Civil Rights Movement was at its peak during the years I was in undergraduate school. I saw my college classmates ending up in jail and being hit with axe handles. I knew that I couldn't go out in the streets for violent demonstrations, because at that time my family had financial problems. You could get arrested and would need bail to get out of jail. College was a struggle for me financially and I didn't have money, nor could I send home for bail money. I did have strong feelings about the issues even though people of my age now seem to think that everybody who had a claim was on the streets. I was not on the streets but I was not out of the battle. My challenge was threefold: I was black, female, and dark-complexioned. And I was a person who clung to clear goals.

I gravitated to social work at Florida State and took a second bachelor's degree in the first year that undergraduate social work education was accredited. I developed a macro perspective, which was fostered by doing my practicums in the Florida State Mental Hospital and in the governor's office. Yet, postmaster's my first job was as a school social worker fighting battles on behalf of poor kids. Frustrated, I departed after a couple of years. I worked for a child-care agency prior to being hired by Victoria Warner to teach at Florida A & M University. I was very happy there, but my position was underwritten by soft money. In the interest of security and a future in academe, I accepted a job back at Florida State. Because I was on the social work faculty and could not pursue my PhD in that department, I decided to study political science. Upon completion of my degree, I was appointed associate dean of the School of Social Work.

Some of this surprises me as I reflect on it, because I consider myself a shy person, one who doesn't exude power. I try to bring people and ideas together and mediate among the elements of a system in order to make it productive. My entrée to the Na-

tional Association of Social Workers (NASW) was probably as a token black woman, first on the national Women's Committee and then, at Sheldon Goldstein's urging, as a candidate for president of the Florida NASW Chapter. I won that race by two votes. A lot of my positions and decisions over time have been challenged. I still work to overcome that contentious trait of our profession by trying to unify people despite our profession's remarkable diversity. Our cause and our mission are more important than our personal status. I have long argued that the divisiveness that has characterized social work historically is antithetical to our very righteous causes. Perhaps the range of roles represented in social work coupled with chronically scarce resources may account for this lack of cohesiveness.

As national president of NASW, I focused on strategic planning. I tried to bridge some of the divisions among factions, both within NASW and in its relationships with other organizations. We made some inroads, too, in developing international program-

ming. I would describe my endeavor as relationship building and working toward unity where it held some promise. I sought organizational stability and development. These goals were not unlike those I subsequently held as president of the Council on Social Work Education. We adopted revised accreditation standards, but, again, in the wake of a lot of dissension. As dean of the School of Social Work at the University of Texas at Austin, I am having firsthand exposure to the new standards while we go through accreditation right now.

Our faculty is explicitly committed to a social justice mission. We are developing collaborations with the Lyndon Baines Johnson

School of Public Affairs and the School of Nursing. The university has long been considered a strong research institution and I believe our school is upholding its place in that reputation. Proportionally, the School of Social Work has more research dollars than any other unit in the university. We want our research to affect practice directly. Regrettably, our commitment to research at times tends to separate us from others in the profession with different priorities. This cyclical divisiveness, which I have witnessed in my various roles, weighs heavy on my heart. It would be more comprehensible to me if we were opposed based on our passions. But I see that we often fail to come together around an issue that should be obviously unifying.

I think social work's extraordinary values have the potential to hold the profession together and to guide us to a more closely knit and focused profession. With my musical background, I cannot help but think of the term symphony, which literally means sounding together. There is a weaving together of disparate and scattered parts to achieve dynamic coherence and accomplishment. So it should be with social work. This is my fervent hope.

Barbara White (b. 1943) has the distinction of being the only social worker to have served as president of the profession's two major organizations, the National Association of Social Workers and the Council on Social Work Education. Presently she is dean of the School of Social Work and Centennial Professor in Leadership for Community, Professional, and Corporate Excellence at the University of Texas at Austin. She is historically the first African American dean at the institution. White previously taught at Florida A & M University and Florida State University and has served on several editorial boards. She has been extensively recognized, most recently with the Presidential Award for Leadership in Social Work Education by NASW.



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