



*The University of Oklahoma®*  
*Health Sciences Center*

DEPARTMENT OF PEDIATRICS  
SECTION OF DEVELOPMENTAL AND BEHAVIORAL PEDIATRICS

March 27, 2015

Re: Division 35 Strickland Daniel Mentoring Award

Dear Dr. Forrest:

It is with great pleasure that I provide this letter in support of the nomination of Dr. Diane Willis for the Division 35 Strickland Daniel Mentoring Award. She has dedicated her career and life to the promotion of ethnic minority issues. Dr. Willis, or Di as she is known, has been a mentor of mine since she was my primary supervisor on clinical internship in 1994. I would like to provide a summary of some of her many professional contributions as well as provide some personal reflections on the impact of Di's professional life on others.

Dr. Willis is Professor Emeritus at the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center (OUHSC), and has remained professionally active despite her retirement, as she continues to teach for the OU Native American Studies Program, the OU Advanced Programs, and provides training for psychology interns, practicum students, and post doctoral fellows in services for American Indian families. Dr. Willis established the first psychology clinic for the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes where she continues to direct the clinic as well as offer clinical training to our students so that they may benefit from the experience and her mentorship in serving American Indian families. Prior to retirement, she was the director of psychological services at the Child Study Center of OUHSC where she established or co-established clinics for infants who were disabled, neuropsychology services, genetic assessment clinic, a diagnostic nursery, child abuse and neglect clinic, and a behavior disorders clinic, as well as co establishing the child protection clinic in the hospital. Toward the end of her faculty career at the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center, Dr. Willis began consulting with American Indian Head Start Programs, working with *Three Feathers Associates* in Norman, Oklahoma (1986-1996) and also with the OU American Indian Institute Head Start Quality Improvement Center (HSQIC) from 1999-2003. She also consulted with the *Zero to Three* organization in Washington, DC, as an Infant Mental Health Consultant to the Eastern Band Cherokee Tribe from 2003-04.

While the above would be sufficient accomplishments for most, Dr. Willis has a wealth of other experiences and professional activities. She has served as President of the Society of Clinical Child Psychology, Society of Pediatric Psychology, Division of Child, Youth, and Family Services, Division of Clinical Psychology, and Division of Psychotherapy. Further, she has served on the APA Committee on Ethnic Minority Affairs, Council of Representatives, Policy and Planning Board, and Board of Professional Affairs. She was the founding editor of the Journal of Pediatric



Psychology and the second editor of the Journal of Clinical Child Psychology. These are but a few of her professional contributions.

In this nomination letter I would also like to reflect on Di's role as a teacher and a mentor, although I am not sure in a letter I can adequately describe Di's impact on literally thousands of professionals from a variety of fields including psychology, pediatrics, social work, education, physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech and language pathology. At the time of Di's retirement, I had the privilege to review and summarize letters received from her students in Oklahoma and across the nation. In reading these letters – lessons from Di were revealed that I believe reflect the essence of Di and why she represents the spirit of this award.

The three lessons taught by Di that I will humbly summarize are:

1. Focus on the family and the community
2. Feel compassion and respect for all living beings
3. Dream Big – Visualize a better tomorrow

The first lesson repeatedly taught by Di is that in order to help children, you must understand, walk in the shoes of, and help the family (including parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, foster parents, siblings), the schools, the community, and all the professionals who are also involved in the child's life. I will never forget the initiation of this lesson for me which began my first week on internship at the health sciences center. I was in Di's office – about as GREEN as you could be and full of energy and excitement about learning how we can help children with psychotherapy. Di said "There is nothing magical about one hour a week." I was stunned at first and began to wonder why I spent so many years learning about child therapy. Overtime as I was mentored by Di, the lesson became clearer. The lesson is clear when you contrast what you can do for a child by seeing the child, alone, in your office, one hour a week and what you can do for a child when you work with the family, the community, the school, the legislature, and all who impact children. The enormous impact you can make across the lifetime of the child and of other children raised in that community when you work with the community rather than just individually with the child. To REALLY make a difference, you must immerse yourself and understand the culture of the community and work to make it a better place in which the children's educational, physical, social, and emotional needs are met and enriched in a family and community that has the supports they require to meet these needs.

Which leads to the next lesson that Di modeled, provided, and taught. *Feel compassion and give respect to all living beings.* Di glows with this compassion. The words from letters written by her students best illustrates this.

Maureen Black, psychologist and president of the Society of Pediatric Psychology speaks to Di's compassion for families "your advocacy is so genuine as you remind us that our emphasis should be on helping children and families who have been less fortunate."

Terri Gallmeier – Psychologist and advocate in the area of child abuse wrote of the compassion and respect Di provides her students – she wrote "I would be remiss if I didn't attempt to put into words a personal trait I have observed in you time and again. It is a quality that sets you apart from other leaders of note. That is, your ability to make every person with whom you come in contact feel



important and significant. You have the capacity to listen to a young student, a still “green” professional, a naïve intern and find value in their opinions and genuinely marvel at their yet undeveloped ideas and theories.”

Linda Valle, a former intern and post-doc, now works for the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, wrote a touching story which reflects Di’s respect for all living things – she wrote:

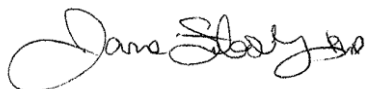
“My favorite memory of my time with you has very little to do with your professional work, but seems to capture your love and concern for all living things. We were walking out of the Indian Health Clinic in El Reno and noticed a baby bird on the sidewalk that had apparently fallen out of its nest. Of course you had NO thought of going home, until the baby bird was safely back in the nest. Your first attempt to solve the problem involved building a pyramid of children that might be able to reach the nest, but this attempt was unsuccessful.... Of course you persevered. You eventually drove your car up on the sidewalk, got out, climbed onto the roof, and returned the bird to the nest. I have always wondered if the bird felt as privileged as I do to have had you touch my life, ....”

This story also provides illustration of the third lesson of Di’s --- *Dream Big – Nothing is Impossible*. Di is nothing if not a Visionary. There are no obstacles for Di. There is always some way to find solutions. When working with children who had been abused and needed mental health services and there was not financial coverage – Di went to Medicaid and advocated for coverage of mental health services for children in Oklahoma. When she discovered that the parents of these children could not access services to learn healthy parenting strategies – she worked with others to start the Parents Assistance Program. In hundreds of ways Di has modeled Dreaming Big and pursuing this. She constantly provides opportunities and her vision to others.

Dr. Robin Gurwitch, former Director of A Better Chance Clinic at Child Study Center wrote “Thank you for helping me dream big.... You have helped me set and reach goals I often believed would be completely out of reach.” Di is inspiring and encouraging for students to stretch to their limits. The lessons I have learned from the “Great Training Case” and “Great Opportunities” that she has provided are continuously used.

In the decade since her retirement, Di continues to be incredible in her role as a teacher, supervisor, advisor, role-model, mentor and cheerleader. She well deserves to be the recipient of the Division 35 Strickland Daniel Mentoring Award. And knowing, Di, if she receives it, she will be quite humble and surprised, and would list many others who deserve it more. I hope you strongly consider Dr. Diane Willis for this award.

Sincerely,



Jane F. Silovsky, PhD  
Professor

