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# The First National Meeting of the Bertha Capen Reynolds Society

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The weekend of July 10-12 was one of the hottest all summer. The intensity of passionate ideas heated the Smith College School for Social Work as much as the ninety degree temperatures during the first national meeting of the Bertha Capen Reynolds Society.

The Bertha Capen Reynolds Society is a new organization of progressive social workers. It has over 600 members in 39 states and 4 countries and has local chapters in several cities. Its largest and most active chapters are in Boston, MA, Sacramento, CA, Philadelphia, PA, and Kalamazoo, MI. The society was conceived at the Bertha Reynolds Centennial Conference held in June 1985 at Smith College. The Conference, organized by the late Jack Kamaiko, was the culmination of a series of events to celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of Bertha Reynolds' birth (1885-1978) and to restore this pioneer social worker's legacy to its rightful place in the history of social work.

Born in Stoughton, MA, Bertha Capen Reynolds was among the first generation of professionally trained social workers. She graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Smith College in 1908 and accepted a position as a high school teacher in Atlanta, GA. Her life in the South exposed her to racism and social injustice, particularly in the lives of her students. This first radicalizing experience led to collaboration with black leaders in education, including W.E.B. DuBois. In 1911 she returned to Massachusetts, and in 1914 she received a B.S. degree from the Boston School for Social Workers (which later became the Simmons College School for Social Work.) During the last year of her training and for four additional years she was a caseworker for the Boston Children's Aid Society. In 1918 she participated in the first training pro-



Bertha C. Reynolds

grams in psychiatric social work: a course at Boston Psychopathic Hospital under Elmer E. Southard and Mary C. Jarrett and the first Smith College summer session of the Training School for Psychiatric Social Work (which later became the School for Social Work). Reynolds was the director of social services at Danvers State Hospital from 1919-1923 and a social worker in the Department of Mental Hygiene in Boston from 1923-1925.

From 1925-1938 Reynolds was the Associate Director of Smith's School for Social Work. Her resignation from the School was the result, in large measure, of growing tension around her maverick views. She respected Marxism and believed that social workers should direct their efforts toward eliminating the root causes of social problems affecting their clients' lives. She paid personally for the public and tenacious presentation of her ideas; following her resignation from Smith she taught and consulted in a number of schools and agencies across the country. Growing suspicion of Marxism in

America in the early forties lead to her being isolated from the profession and, after a very satisfying five years as a case supervisor at the National Maritime Union in New York City, she was forced into a pensionless, early retirement in 1948. She maintained a small clinical practice and was an active community volunteer while continuing to study and write. She authored four books in her lifetime — *Between Client and Community* (1934), *Learning and Teaching in the Practice of Social Work* (1942), *Social Work and Social Living* (1951), and her autobiography *Uncharted Journey* (1963) — in addition to numerous professional articles, presentations and essays. Her papers are preserved in the social work archive of the Sophia Smith Collection of the College's library.

Not surprisingly, the National Organizing Committee of the Bertha Capen Reynolds Society found it an easy decision to hold their first national meeting at Smith College. Co-convened by Ann Withorn and Ken Grossinger, the meeting was planned as a gathering — not a conference. And gather they did. Over 100 members (many from the northeastern U.S., but also from Michigan, West Virginia, Louisiana, and California) attended four plenary sessions and four working groups designed to clarify the purpose of the Society within the social work profession and to initiate dialogue on overlooked, yet compelling issues of the times.

At the Friday night opening session chaired by Ken Grossinger, the Society was welcomed by fellow member Dean Ann Hartman. Dean Hartman's remarks provided an historical grounding for the event, referring to Reynolds' years at Smith. She also underscored that though Reynolds was an advocate of fundamental social change, she was also a highly skilled clinician. Reynolds' life is an example of how micro and macro levels of social work practice can be integrated holistically. The Society was also welcomed by a letter from two of Bertha Reynolds associates, Tommanie Walker and Pearl Turk, who worked with Reynolds in the National Maritime Union. Walker and Turk's letter included an inspirational poem written by Reynolds, which was excerpted from *The Years Have Spoken*, a volume of Reynolds'

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annual Christmas poems that Turk and Walker are editing.

Past NASW President Mary Ann Mahaffey gave the keynote address. As a member of the Detroit City Council and Professor of Social Work at Wayne State University, Mary Ann Mahaffey provided many examples from her years of experience that raise important questions for the profession. Arriving at a consensus on the causes of poverty is among the most pressing. If the profession believes that poverty is an individual's personal problem, rather than a public issue and massive social problem, our interventions in the lives of clients will be superficial. An economic critique of advanced capitalism and the nature of wealth and poverty in this country is necessary for the rejuvenation of a federal welfare state and movement towards a planned economy. Following Mahaffey, Ann Withorn presented the conference agenda. Afterwards, the members relaxed to the music of Marc Miringoff and Regina McCabe, a duet of social workers from New York who sing songs of social concern, humor, and satire.

Saturday morning began with a plenary meeting where representatives of local chapters reported on their activities. Susan Kinoy, a social work activist based at the Villars Foundation in Washington DC then set the tone for the day's work. Discussing the creativity of grassroots projects her foundation has funded, she emphasized the importance of social change at the community level. For example, one group of senior citizens changed the delivery of medical services to the elderly by publishing the names of physicians who do not accept Medicare. She described a rally of the Ku Klux Klan she recently attended in Tennessee where hundreds of white and black counterprotesters lined the march of the Klan, turning their backs in silent protest as the racists passed by. These kinds of creative activities, using as many existing channels as possible, are what is needed to make issues of social justice tangible at the local level.

The members then dispersed into four groups for the remainder of the day. The group topics were: *Worker-Client Relationships*, *Labor and Social Services*, *Defending and Challenging the Welfare State*, and *Developing an International Agenda*.

Joan Dworkin of the Medical Social Work Department at the University of Illinois chaired the session on *Worker-Client Relationships*. Murray Gruber, professor of social work at Loyola University responded to a presentation by Arline Prigoff of San Francisco State University. Prigoff suggested that systems theory offers a useful framework for understanding micro and macro level intervention, that we analyze the context of our work in a class stratified society, and that we analyze the nature of power and domination as it ap-

plies to clinical work. Discussion centered on the political-socioeconomic context in which practice takes place and how the politics of the profession filter into the worker-client relationship. The inter-relatedness of the client's power, the worker's power, and the profession's power was explored in search of ways to develop authentic relationships with clients that can create substantive improvements in their lives.

The session on *Labor and Social Services* was facilitated by Michael A. Dover, a founding organizer of the society and a union-based social worker in New York City. Beth Silverman, director of Human Services Dept. for District 65 of the UAW and Lee Schore, from the Center for Working Life in Oakland, CA, served as resource persons. The working session focused on how social workers need to adopt a more class-conscious understanding of themselves as workers, see their clients as workers, and focus on the workplace as a cause of stress and dysfunction. It is in the workplace where both social workers and clients are exploited with low pay and oppressive working conditions. These power relationships need to be examined to help workers redirect their anger from the individual internalization of stress and malfunction to collective action. The discussion focused on the centrality of work as a mental health issue and the implications of this perspective for the reform of workplaces, unions, and mental health services.


Fred Newdom facilitated the workshop on *Defending and Challenging the Welfare State*. David Gil, director of Brandeis University's Center for Social Change, presented a framework for thinking and acting upon social policy. He proposed a set of reforms and a practice plan that translates into an Economic Bill of Rights: the right to work, the right to income, the right to health care, education, housing and other entitlements that should be universally available. Strict guarantees against racism, sexism, and classism would be a part of this effort for economic justice. Among other publicly held prejudices and stereotypic notions, the idea of dependency was critiqued and the need to demystify its negative connotations was discussed by the group.

Harvey Williams of the University of Pacific, Don Cooney of the School of Social Work of Western Michigan University, and three representatives of Social Workers for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament led the discussions in the session on *Developing An International Agenda*. Williams analyzed the way Nicaragua has managed to transform its society through redistribution, a flexible intervention process where what does not work is simply changed, and the mobilization of people in communities to meet basic needs, e.g. vaccinating children

against polio. Recognizing the problems of limited resources and the continuing war, he discussed how the revolution in Nicaragua was not an event but an ongoing process. Lessons about community development for the U.S. were explored. Cooney's presentation centered on South Africa. He reviewed recent developments and the solidarity movement in the U.S. to help end apartheid. Rose Markham of Western Massachusetts NASW, Henry Hicks from New York City, and Jack Emmer of Philadelphia discussed the activities of the Social Workers for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament in making connections between peace, justice, and human services. The group developed a framework for analysis, visions, strategy, and tactics for linking international issues to domestic ones.

The Society came together in the evening to hear Richard Cloward, Professor of Social Work at Columbia University, discuss his and his collaborator, Frances Fox Diven's research on why democracy does not exist in this country. Large numbers of the nation's citizens are not registered to vote or simply do not vote. The democratic party, which has traditionally attempted to represent the interests of the industrial working class, has not been effective due to shifts in political alignments, particularly in the south. Cloward discussed the problem of achieving democracy, the theoretical rationale for activist campaigns aimed at registering voters, and the practice issues of these campaigns regarding challenging laws and making voter registration an accessible right.

The final session of the Society was Sunday morning, where the working groups reported on their work and future organizational goals were discussed.

After two days of intensive work and discussion, the participants emerged with new ideas, energy, and friends to sustain them in their social work back home. The four members of the resident faculty of the School for Social Work who attended — Gail Perlman, Cathy Reissman, Jerry Sachs and Phebe Sessions — said they were infused with new ideas for teaching. Beyond the conference itself, it is clear that the Bertha Reynolds Society is quickly becoming both a resource and a supportive context for progressive social workers around the nation. Bertha Reynolds would be happy to see her ideas honored in this way. 

For more information about the Bertha Capen Reynolds Society, write: The Bertha Capen Reynolds Society, P.O. Box 20563, Columbus Circle Station, New York, NY 10023.