



Meet NACSW Social Work Educator Carla MacDonald

“Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You’re not in the driver’s seat; I am” (Matthew 16:24 The Message).

In the fall of 2005, I wasn’t sure that I should have followed God’s direction. I had left the field of social work practice after 26 years in nonprofit management to enter higher education and develop a BSW program at a local faith-based institution. I left a world of familiarity and entered a field of uncertainty.

One of my courses that fall was *Introduction to Social Work*. A primary assignment was weekly journals where students reflected on lectures, readings, and offered their personal responses. While grading that first round of journals, one caught my attention. A student named Katie Mitchell wrote about her selection of the social work major as a tribute to her aunt, Carla, who had died in a car accident while she was in an MSW program. Katie wrote about the impact this aunt had upon her even though the car accident had occurred before she was born.

It suddenly occurred to me that the Carla she was referring had been in my BSW program when I was a student. After 27 years, the anguish of hearing about Carla’s death came flooding back. Carla was a natural leader of our class. I had transferred into this social work program as a junior, and was hesitant to integrate myself into friendship groups which had already been

formed. Carla saw the self-doubt in me and reached out to become my mentor. She joked about us having the same name and how we were brought into each other's lives to build each other up. I looked up to Carla with admiration. It was shocking to me that a strong and gifted person had been taken from our profession in a split second when a driver ran a stop sign.

I had always regretted not attending Carla's funeral, but I didn't know her family, and despite the impact she had made upon my life in building my self-confidence, my insecurities took over. I stayed away from paying final respects to the person who had impacted my life so wonderfully.

Once Katie heard about our connection, she turned to her grandparents, Pat and Bob Mitchell, Carla's parents, and shared the news that her social work professor had gone to school with their lost daughter. They wanted to meet me and would be traveling to our campus soon to see Katie play on our school volleyball team. It was a beautiful meeting at a local restaurant. They were so eager to hear stories I might have about Carla. Despite the 27 years that had lapsed since Carla's death, they were anxious to reclaim bits and pieces of her life.

At the conclusion of our dinner, Pat pulled out a small box wrapped in Christmas paper and handed it to me. The Christmas wrapping paper was dated and from a much earlier time period. Our meeting was in September, so the season of Christmas paper didn't seem to fit. I was confused why she was giving me a Christmas present. The small box said "Carla" on the gift tag. Pat explained that after Carla's death (which had occurred right before Christmas in 1978), the Mitchell family Christmas never occurred that year due to their loss.

Pat said that while she was putting away Christmas decorations that year, she found this box with a name tag in Carla's handwriting. She assumed that Carla had wrapped a gift to herself as a joke in her traditional crazy sense of humor. Pat said that after hearing Katie's story about a classmate of Carla's who had the same name, she knew that this gift had been meant for me. Carla had made plans to meet me for dinner after the holidays before she returned to graduate school. That meeting never happened. In front of me, I had a gift from the past and a reminder that this beautiful mentor was still a part of my life.

I opened the gift in front of Katie and her grandparents at dinner that night. It was a silver bracelet which I wear proudly every day. The note inside the box said, "To my forever friend." As the voice from the past spoke to me, Pat said that she had never opened this gift thinking that it was a gift Carla had given to herself. By not opening that gift, she believed that she kept a part of Carla alive forever. Now that I had released this gift from its box, a new friendship emerged with Carla's parents.

Each year as I begin another school year, I ask God for direction and guidance for the school year ahead. I not only feel God's presence, but I feel Carla's guidance as well. I am forever grateful that I let God lead me to this social work role in higher education.

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