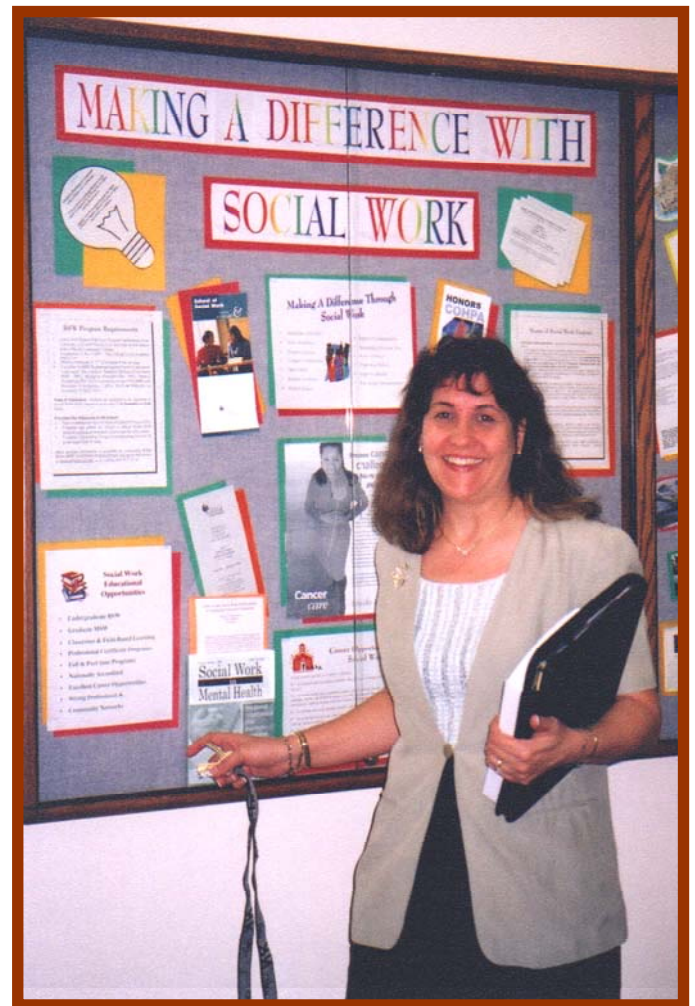


## *What Makes a Social Work Legend?*

# **PASSION!**



*With a list of accomplishments far longer than her last name, Sophia Dziegielewski, PhD, LCSW, is an inspirational social work leader.*

**BY KATE JACKSON**

It's often said that you can't have it all. Social worker Sophia Dziegielewski, PhD, LCSW, is proof that you can.

At the mid-point in her career, she's already blazed a professional trail that few could hope to follow. At age 47, Dziegielewski is a tenured professor in the University of Central Florida's (UCF) School of Social Work as well as a professor of sociology and health services administration, a mediator for the local public defender's office, and the creator of a preparation course for social work licensure —through which she's trained

more than 9,000 social workers nationwide. A Vietnam-era Air Force veteran, a Gulf War Army veteran, and an officer in the active reserves, she's written 41 peer-reviewed articles, 5 textbooks, 3 training manuals, and 19 textbook chapters.

A highly popular keynote speaker at conferences across the country, Dziegielewski has delivered hundreds of presentations on a diversity of subjects. "She can ignite any roomful of people with her excitement about and her commitment to social work," says Ana M. Leon, PhD, associate professor at the UCF School of Social Work.

Dziegielewski has garnered more honors and awards than many social workers will receive in a lifetime. Last year alone, she received one of UCF's most prestigious awards, the universitywide Excellence in Graduate Teaching Award; earned the university's College of Health and Public Affairs' Excellence in Graduate Teaching Award; was chosen from among 2,000 faculty members to receive the University Faculty Leadership Award; and was honored with the Teaching Incentive Program Award.

At the same time, she's managed to nurture a thriving marriage and, with her husband, Linden Siri, is raising her nine-year-old daughter, Lea. They also have a 26-year-old son, J. R.

Outshining these accomplishments, her passion, commitment, and generosity have made an indelible impression upon her clients, students, and colleagues, many of whom know her as "Dr. D." "Sophia Dziegielewski is one of those truly rare people," says Sam Hickman, ACSW, LCSW, executive director of the West Virginia Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW). "She's an extraordinary teacher and academician, accomplished clinical social worker, meticulous researcher, and prolific author. She reasons and communicates clearly, her audiences absolutely love her, and she has not just a grasp, but a mastery of a wide range of professional topics."

According to Hickman, who organizes the NASW's West

Virginia Chapter conference and who has been inviting his "dream speaker" back for the last eight years, "Her energy level makes me wonder whether we belong to the same species. After training all day, she'll head back to her hotel room or straight to the airport with her laptop to keep working on a publication."

"She's one of those workaholics who's not in recovery," adds UCF colleague Cheryl Green, PhD, an associate professor in the School of Social Work who calls Dziegielewski "the most wonderful colleague."

"You might expect some eccentricity, even pathology, in someone this unusual and accomplished, but Sophia is one of the sanest folks I've ever met," Hickman says. "She simply exhibits all of the most wonderful traits, abilities, and accomplishments of our profession." Hickman echoes the popular opinion of students, colleagues, audiences and administrators when he says, "She ought to be social work's poster child."

Talk to Dziegielewski for a few minutes and you'll know what her effusive colleagues mean. Displaying none of the rushed, clipped speech of the busy and accomplished, her voice takes you in. In its quietness is the rare combination of charm and sincerity that will make you feel instantly as if you've known her for years. Listen for a few more minutes and you'll understand, as Hickman explains, that "she never fails to make a human connection." What you'll hear is the contentment that comes from having found your place and the joy of being able to do what you love.

---

## HEARING THE CALLING

When Dziegielewski graduated from high school in the top of her class at age 16, she didn't know what she wanted to do with her life. Although she'd earned a scholarship, it wasn't enough to allow her to attend college. Rejecting her parents' desire that she get married and get a job, she took an unusual route and entered the military, which allowed her to complete her education.

After serving in the Air Force from 1974 to 1977, Dziegielewski was an emergency medical technician and a nurse until a chance encounter with a patient led her to her true calling. Working as a surgical nurse, she'd been asked to prepare a patient scheduled for a tubal ligation—at that time an irreversible procedure. While preparing the patient, she began talking to the 33-year old woman. Mindful that more women at

this time were having babies into their 40s, she told the patient that 50% of marriages end in divorce, and that—if the patient underwent the tubal ligation and were to divorce—pregnancy would no longer be a possibility. Had the patient and her husband, she asked, considered a vasectomy? It was an option, the patient said, that no one had discussed. "What I realized then was that many people came in for surgery, but the doctors and nurses didn't talk to these individuals about what surgery meant to them or about the choices they had," says Dziegielewski.

The next morning, the patient, who'd already been administered her preoperative drugs, was being wheeled into surgery. "The minute she saw me," Dziegielewski recalls, "she said, 'Nurse, I've been thinking about what you said. You're right. It might be better for my husband to have a vasectomy.' I thought the surgeon was going

to have a stroke. After her outburst, the patient couldn't have the surgery, there was a big gap in the surgery schedule, and no one talked to me for a couple of weeks. It keyed me in to the fact that you have to talk to people about the decisions that they make, but so often in nursing, they focus on the medical and not these other aspects."

Dziegielewski then decided that she needed to do more talking. She took her first social work course as part of the elective process for the nursing program, and "fell absolutely in love." She knew right away that social work was the place for her and immediately plotted a new course. The daughter of Polish immigrants, Dziegielewski was the first person in her family to attend college. Her parents, however, would have preferred a more traditional role of young wife and mother for their daughter. She had to convince her father that she should go to college because he didn't believe that it was an appropriate path for women. "He was supportive," she says,

"once he realized there was no stopping me."

And there's been no stopping her ever since. Dziegielewski earned a bachelor's degree in sociology from UCF and went on to receive MSW and PhD degrees from Florida State University. Because scholarships didn't cover the cost of her education, she worked throughout her college years, often as a waitress—a job that surprisingly provided experience that would benefit her in her career. "I did a lot of social work while I was waitressing," she recalls. "I loved to talk to people, and it sharpened my people skills."

Her first full-time job was in social work, as director of social work services for a 192-bed skilled facility, and she learned fast on her feet there. "I was the entire department. They handed me a clipboard and said, 'Go.' I learned more there than on any other job I've ever had because I was it. No one knew what I didn't know and I didn't know what I didn't know, so it was perfect for me. I was able to learn and use my nursing background and my social work background together."

---

## A PASSION FOR TEACHING

To give back what she felt she had been given in her youth, Dziegielewski returned to the military as a social worker. She was able to choose her assignment, and she worked in a residency program at Ft. Benning, GA for three years. It was there that her love for teaching bloomed. Explains Green, "Her talent is certainly scholarship, but her passion is teaching. A good teacher is someone who has passion and compassion, and she certainly demonstrates both." Her enthusiasm for teaching, says her colleague, is infectious and even sometimes annoying, because she wants everyone to be there for the students just like she is. "She's on me like a big thumb," laughs Green, who's quick to add that Dziegielewski can be dispassionate when necessary. "She calls students to the fire, but she'll hang in there with them. She stays with them when they go to their licensing tests, and she guarantees that she'll stay with them until they succeed."

"Sophia is an exceptional educator whose students can never say enough about her style of presentation and her interest in assisting them in the learning process" says UCF Instructor and Daytona Beach MSW Program Coordinator, George A. Jacinto, MEd, MSW, LCSW, "She's selfless in her

work with students," he adds. "Some days there's a line of students outside her office waiting to discuss their ideas and projects with her. She's always challenging them to reach toward higher goals."

Dziegielewski credits much of her love of teaching to the influential example of a high school music teacher. A music major in high school, Dziegielewski attended state music festivals where she competed in singing, which she could do quite well, and sight-singing—the ability to see a note and sing it—which she could not. She vividly recalls one competition that began with sight-singing. "I'll never forget it. I was doing a song by Rogers and Hammerstein, 'One Hand, One Heart,' and I was extremely nervous. They began the competition with sight-singing, which I totally bombed. Then I had to sing in front of a group of people, accompanied by my piano teacher, and I was absolutely petrified." It was a very complicated song, she explains. "If you failed to take a breath in the right place, you'd never be able to complete it. I was so devastated and so nervous that I took the breath in the wrong place, and there was no way that I was going to be able to finish the song with a decent grade."

Akin to a small miracle, her piano teacher stopped playing the piano, turned to the judge, and said, "I made a mistake. I played the wrong key." Then, Dziegielewski recalls, "He turned to me and he said, 'This time you sing that song right; sing it for your parents and the people you care about,' and he started to play. The second time, I sang the song from my heart. I sang it for my parents and the people who were important to me. And, when I finished singing, there wasn't a dry eye in the room."

Although she received a D in sight-singing, it was balanced by the A's she received for intonation and voice quality, and she left the festival with a blue ribbon. "It's not that I couldn't sing the song. I just didn't do it right the first time," she

remembers. She's never forgotten the grace of the teacher who recognized that. "He took the time and then took the blame upon himself to give me a second chance."

As a teacher and faculty leader, Dziegielewski prides herself on her ability to give of herself and give others the same kind of second chance she was granted so many years ago—a dedication that dovetails with her approach to teaching. "My teaching philosophy is simple," she says. "I believe there are numerous intelligent people you'll meet in your life, but few wise people. The difference is that intelligence is the sum total of what you know, but wisdom is measured by what you can teach others. It's a gift you're given and a gift you give."

---

#### A MENTOR'S MENTOR

It's a gift she shares with colleagues as well, who credit her with inspiring, encouraging, and validating them. According to Green, "There are always people in her office. I don't see how she gets anything done."

Nor does Jacinto: "On several occasions, I have sought her input on papers that I have written. She's always willing to read and spend time discussing different options and ideas to enhance the work."

"I don't think I've ever come to her with a request or a student concern when she hasn't become as involved with it as I was," adds Green, who remembers the time that Dziegielewski was a force in motivating her to go up for a promotion that

Green had decided wasn't worth the effort. "She stayed on me over the years and helped me look at the value of what I was doing. She's persistent, insistent, and consistent."

A question Dziegielewski hears often is "Do you ever sleep?" She brushes the question aside, as if sleep is irrelevant. "In social work, we sometimes don't realize how much we change lives. To be able to influence someone's life in a positive way, to help people see things differently, is the most incredible blessing. I absolutely love what I do. I teach, and I'm thrilled. I write, and I get goose bumps. This field has allowed me to find my passion and keep it. Says Green, "She gets caught up in your joy, and it makes your joy even greater."

---

*Kate Jackson is a staff writer at Social Work Today*

*Reprinted with permission from the April 7, 2003 issue of Social Work Today© Great Vally Publishing Co.*

*Dr. Sophia F. Dziegielewski -- can be reached by e-mail at: [SiriPro@aol.com](mailto:SiriPro@aol.com)*