In Memoriam


Dedicated public servant, wounded and decorated war hero, devoted family man, tireless advocate for people with disabilities, scholar: Such a litany of superlatives suggests a politician running for very high office. In fact, it could have been. This, however, is only a partial description of Michael J. Begab, whose long and distinguished career ended with his death on January 27, 2003, at Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

Mike Begab was born on November 12, 1918, in Chicago, the youngest in a large family. After graduating from high school, he worked in printing, clerical work, bookkeeping, and accounting. On January 10, 1942, he was married to Estelle Harriett Metter. In that critical year he joined the U. S. Army Air Corps as a cadet. He was commissioned as a navigator and subsequently served with the U. S. 8th Air Force based in England. The following is an account of Mike’s military experience, given by the late Dr. George Tarjan:

He chose the air forces over the ground troops, because he wanted to come home uninjured or not at all. He was not afraid of dying, but dreaded returning with a major handicap. But fate would not have it his way. Prior to our invasion of Europe, during the massive battles for air supremacy, he was on a routine mission over southern France. His bomber was hit. The crew had to bail out. While parachuting and searching for the necessary inner strength as well as the solid earth, he noted that he was blinded in one eye by shrapnel fragments. Blindness came to his other eye a few days later, while he was sheltered in a French farmhouse by the underground.

Begab was captured and sent to a military hospital in Germany. As an enemy airman and an American Jew, he had plenty of reason for trepidation, but he was treated humanely if somewhat ineptly. He felt lucky to have a very long address on his dog tags—he told the Germans that the J on the address line designated his apartment! He told later of a particular German nurse who was kind to him. They communicated by way of similarities between Begab’s childhood Yiddish and the nurse’s native German. Many years later this sympathetic nurse visited the Begab family in America.

Although Mike underwent operations in Germany intended to restore his sight, they probably prolonged his blindness. Finally returned to the United States through a prisoner exchange arranged by the Swedish Red Cross; he was hospitalized in military hospitals, had several further operations, underwent an Army rehabilitation program, and began the long process of adjusting to life as a blind person. Fortunately, there was one more operation, which was successful in restoring his vision to a just-adequate level.

Following his discharge from the Army Air Corps, with the rank of First Lieutenant, Mike returned to school at the University of Chicago, completing a bachelor’s degree in 1948 and a master’s degree in social work in 1951. In 1968, while working full time and going to school nights and weekends, he completed a PhD degree in sociology at Catholic University of America.

As a social worker, Mike Begab went to work immediately to support people with disabilities at the Illinois Department of Public Welfare, Division for the Blind, in Chicago. He subsequently became case supervisor at Southern Wisconsin Colony (Union Grove, Wisconsin), Director of Social Services at Lima State Hospital (Lima, Ohio), Director of Social Services at Columbus State School (Columbus, Ohio), and Specialist in Social Services for Mentally Retarded Children in the Children’s Bureau in Washington. With such a rich background in providing social services to persons with mental retardation in particular, he was a natural choice to become a Washington insider when President Kennedy and others of his administration initiated a strong program in the field of mental retardation. Mike became Executive Officer to the Special Assistant to the President for Mental Retardation, working in the White House and the Executive Office Building. Following the creation of the National Institute
Memoriam

H. Carl Haywood

of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), he served as Social Science Advisor, Mental Retardation Program, 1964–1967, and, subsequently, as Head of the Mental Retardation Research Centers Program at NICHD from 1967 to 1979.

During those critical years for the development of the original 12 mental retardation research centers, Mike Begab nurtured the new centers, challenged them to walk the fine line that defined the relation of scientific excellence and mission relevance, advocated for them within the NICHD, and helped to establish and implement policies that have sustained the centers and kept them productive to this day.

Mike’s own scholarship produced over 70 books, monographs, articles, and chapters in edited books, the great majority dealing with ecological questions in mental retardation, such as environmental effects of behavior and development of persons with retardation and the matching of personal needs and settings. He served as an editorial consultant for Mental Retardation from 1965 to 1969. When I assumed the editorship of the American Journal of Mental Deficiency in 1969, Mike signed on as Associate Editor for Sociology and Social Work, continuing in that capacity until 1983, when he became Editor of the AAMD Monograph Series. In that capacity he supervised the publication of several of the most important and influential publications in the field of mental retardation. During and following that publishing experience, he was a Vice President of University Park Press (1979–1982) and Consultant to its President (1982–1985). In those positions he brought many important books on various aspects of mental retardation and developmental disabilities to fruition.

Mike's natural leadership qualities led him to take on important positions in professional and scientific organizations. Having become a Fellow of the American Association on Mental Deficiency—AAMD (now the American Association on Mental Retardation—AAMR) in 1963, he served as a council member (1968–1971), Vice President for Social Work (1964–1966), and President (1972–1973). Even when not serving in a particular office of AAMD, Mike was a conspicuous and vocal presence, advocating for better and more research and services for persons with mental retardation, influencing association policies, and working to make the AAMD a more effective organization.

Mike was also a leader in the International Association for the Scientific Study of Mental Deficiency, serving as program chair for its 4th International Congress (1973–1976), President-Elect (1973–1976), and President (1976–1979). He served the National Consortium of Mental Health Services for Children, first as Executive Secretary (1972–1975) and then as Vice Chair (1975–1977). He was a member of the AAMD (now AAMR), the International Association for the Scientific Study of Mental Deficiency (now International Association for the Scientific Study of Intellectual Disability), the American Sociological Association, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and the Royal Academy of Medicine.

Michael J. Begab is survived by his wife, Estelle; two daughters, Andrea S. Wingo and Deborah B. Vandamm; and a son, Scott B. Begab. He is remembered with fondness and gratitude by colleagues at NICHD, by directors and staff members of the national mental retardation and developmental disabilities research centers, by thousands of individuals with mental retardation and their families, by authors with whom he worked, and by many members of AAMR and IASSID.—H. Carl Haywood

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