

An Iconic Evaluation Trailblazer is Gone, but His Legacy Remains: A Tribute to Michael Scriven

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Professor Michael Scriven (MS) is definitely the most brilliant person I have personally known. I met him in August 2004 when I arrived in Kalamazoo to pursue my doctoral studies in the IDPE program. E. Jane Davidson, the first program director of IDPE, processed my application. Shortly before I arrived in Kalamazoo, I received an email from Jane indicating that she was returning to New Zealand and that MS was coming to Kalamazoo to take over as director of the IDPE. She indicated that she was assigning him as my dissertation chair and asked *how I felt about that*. I replied that I was okay with the arrangement. Of course, when I arrived in Kalamazoo and found out more about MS, I got somewhat nervous. However, as I reflect on my academic journey, I am honored and privileged to have been mentored by one of the greatest evaluation trailblazers. MS not only mentored me during my 3 years in the IDPE but continued to do so up to three months before departing planet earth.

There is no denying that the late Australian-born MS was one of the greatest and most influential pioneers in the evaluation profession. He was a very accomplished man making contributions to several disciplines, including critical thinking, mathematics, philosophy, psychology, and—of course—evaluation. He achieved the status of professor at age 32, produced hundreds of scholarly publications, earned many prestigious awards, and served on numerous journals and boards. MS, as we all know, was exceedingly passionate about evaluation. So passionate, in fact, that he wanted the entire world to know about evaluation. He founded JMDE in 2004 and insisted that it must

be a free online journal whilst maintaining the rigor of prestigious journals. He was very concerned about the cost of books and constantly talked to me about why it was important to have low-cost publication fees. In fact, shortly after his death, I learnt that he operated his own printing press, Edge Press, out of his basement and that the first and second editions of his famous *Evaluation Thesaurus* were actually published by Edge Press. His enthusiasm for evaluation also resulted in his setting up the Faster Forward Fund (FFF), and his entire estate was left to advance the practice and profession of evaluation.

This tribute will share some of my IDPE student memories of MS, along with some memories of the other side of MS, the generous, kind-hearted man—which many may not have been privy to, but which I learnt about and personally experienced during our 18-plus-year friendship.

I arrived in Kalamazoo a few days before MS and was assigned as an RA to MS. My first task was to organize his office library. Upon entering his office, I was horrified to find boxes piled from ceiling to floor. As I opened box after box of books, I was stunned at the variety and collection of books that MS had accumulated. From cars to cooking, guns, knives, fishing, hunting, photography, clay pot making, travel, statistics, evaluation, critical thinking, to name a few. I had to keep rearranging the bookshelves because of the diversity of books. I was not a librarian. However, I just could not place the books on the shelves without some logical and sensible order. This job took me several weeks, as I could only work for about two hours daily before MS arrived

at work. Each day, before I left his office, we spent about ten minutes chatting about books that I had discovered, particularly those outside of academia. My initial impression when I saw the diversity of books was that he had simply purchased some to support the authors. However, I discovered from our conversations that he was actually quite passionate about many hobbies. Moreover, he had actually read all of the books. By the time I had completed shelving all books, I had secretly nicknamed him “The Walking Encyclopedia.” I maintained that nickname, as there was never a single topic you could ask a question about that he was not knowledgeable on.

On the first day of class, MS told us to put away our books and take out a sheet of paper. He then proceeded to give us a short-answer question on an evaluation topic. We were horrified. Fortunately, the test was not for marks. He was simply trying to gauge where students were in terms of evaluation knowledge. He was passionate about critical thinking and proceeded to explain, after he had read our answers, that our responses for the most part lacked critical thinking.

Despite frequent requests, I don’t recall our class ever receiving a single course outline for any course taught by MS. He was extremely tech savvy for a man of his age. However, he never used PowerPoint during teaching. Notes were based on whatever you could manage to scribble in your notebook.

Three months after my arrival, I remember telling my peers one night after class that I was dreading the winter, as I had never experienced winter. MS overheard the conversation. Quite unexpectedly, he handed me some money and told me to take a taxi and go to Meijer to purchase an electric blanket. One of my peers offered to take me, so I returned the money.

One of my fondest memories was the large wooden bowl of assorted nuts that came into the classroom on many occasions. MS was a food connoisseur. He also loved shopping on Amazon. He would purchase many varieties of nuts, open the packets, and dump them into the big wooden bowl. He arrived at the conference room, which was our classroom, with his notes in one hand and the bowl in the other. Whenever the bowl arrived, class started with a description of the nuts, their nutritional content, etc. The bowl was then passed around the conference table, and as we sampled the nuts he was careful to always ensure that every nut variety was properly described in the event that anyone had an allergy to a particular nut. He would spend about 5

minutes describing the nut variety in the bowl at the start of each class, as new nut varieties were constantly being added to the bowl. As the bowl was being passed around the conference table, he would abruptly say, “Now back to the topic for today—you can give me your evaluation of the nuts after class.”

His first Christmas party for the IDPE students and EC staff was hosted at his beautiful lakefront home in December 2004. It was winter and the lake was frozen. He told us we could go ice fishing. Since he was a food connoisseur, he felt that everyone would probably appreciate his extensive and diverse palate. On that occasion, he announced that he had a surprise on the menu—snake. He encouraged us all to try it. I was not brave enough.

In my second year in the program, I experienced major health challenges and needed to have surgery. My scholarship sponsor informed me three days prior to surgery that my health provider would not be covering my surgery. I was dismayed, as the sum was quite substantial. When I told MS, he simply said, “Go ahead and do your surgery—we will get it sorted out or find the money somehow.” Fortunately, there was a mix-up, and my medical bills were all covered. Two nights before my actual surgery, MS invited my sister and me to dinner and we had a great conversation. Whilst in hospital, I received a bouquet of flowers from MS. My sister said that the flowers were so beautiful that as the nurses changed shifts, they all came into the room to admire the flowers.

My dissertation topic was discussed with MS at 2 a.m. one morning. I was reading a piece of his scholarship and disagreed with something that he said about costs. The idea germinated that I could do my dissertation on this topic, as I was a CPA and had a different perspective. I sent him an email at 1:30 a.m. Of course, he replied at 1:45 a.m., so I decided to ask if we could chat on the phone. I was excited, but also nervous, as I was challenging the great MS. However, there was no need for worry. He asked me to submit a proposal. He respected my CPA knowledge and subsequently acknowledged some of my concerns in his *Key Evaluation Checklist*.

One Sunday morning I got locked out of my apartment. I was not fond of winter clothes, so my apartment was like a furnace. I was therefore dressed in summer clothes when this unfortunate incident happened, and snow was on the ground. I knocked on several apartment doors, but no one answered. Eventually, I had no choice but to make my way to the Evaluation Center or risk

freezing. As I pushed the entry door for the building that housed the EC, I breathed a sigh of relief. I made my way upstairs and found the main door to the Evaluation Center open. MS was in his office and called campus police to come to my rescue.

Chris Coryn was the first IDPE student to defend his dissertation. He defended on Friday,

and I defended on Monday. We had a farewell party for MS hosted at the home of Chris and Daniela that weekend. It was a fabulous party. This is a photo of MS at his farewell party. MS left Kalamazoo on Tuesday after my defense. Interestingly, we arrived in Kalamazoo at around the same time and also left Kalamazoo at around the same time.



Michael Scriven, Chris Coryn, and Arlen Gullickson at Michael's Farewell Party

I returned to Barbados in 2007 and took up a job with the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus. In my first semester, I was tasked with organizing our annual departmental conference. I asked my head of department if we could invite MS as our keynote speaker. MS

agreed even though we were not able to pay him any speaker fees and came to Barbados for 3 days. He even visited my evaluation class to speak with the students. When I moved into my own home, he sent me a beautiful jade candleholder as a gift. I still have it.



Michael Scriven in Barbados

I maintained contact with MS after my studies and am really happy that I did, as he

continued to mentor me and inspire me in my professional academic journey. In the early years,

we chatted quarterly on the phone and in person at the AEA conference. MS had a remarkable memory; he would ask about my family, how my house construction was going, what was happening at work, what I was writing, and so on. After I again encountered major health challenges in 2013, he asked in every conversation about my health and how I was doing. Although in the latter years of his life he had more health complications that I could keep count of, he was skilled at switching the topic away from his own challenges and refocusing on how I was doing.

In 2004, MS announced in class that he had asked Professor Brian Yates to write a book on cost-inclusive evaluation. In 2012, I approached Brian to ask him if he would consider coauthoring the book with me. Brian agreed, and we signed a contract and commenced our project. However, various life events terminated our writing. During the early COVID-19 lockdown, we renegotiated our contract with Guilford Press and started afresh. The manuscript was completed during the COVID era. Just prior to submission, I asked Brian if we could dedicate the book to MS. MS had actually written the foreword. Brian readily agreed. The dedication was supposed to be a surprise, with MS not knowing about the dedication until the book launch. However, as his health started to deteriorate, his secretary and I agreed that we should let him see the dedication as soon as the book was released. We invited him to the book launch via Zoom. His secretary indicated that he would be attending and that he wanted to say a few words but preferred to do so via audio. Five minutes before the start of the book launch on March 31, 2023, I phoned his secretary, who indicated that MS was coming in via video instead. Although the audio was not very good, the video was quite clear. MS spoke for about 15 minutes with all of his medical apparatus attached. I will treasure that video, as it is my last live recording of him. MS inspired Brian and me to write *Cost-Inclusive Evaluation: Planning It, Doing It, Using It*, and we are happy that he was able to see this particular publication before his death.

In the last 2 years of his life, our telephone conversations became more frequent, sometimes weekly. I had spoken to him only a week before he passed. When I got an email on August 26 indicating that I should call immediately as his time was quite near, I called promptly. He was not able to speak, but his nurse told me he could hear me. I did not know what to say. On August 28, I received a WhatsApp message that he was gone. Even though by virtue of his age alone it was

inevitable, I was stunned and in disbelief. He had recovered so many times before that I expected him to pull through again. As I write this tribute, his telephone numbers are still on my landline phone and cell phone. He is gone, but I know that his legacy will live on through his scholarship, peers, and students. I am indeed privileged to have crossed paths with this kind, noble, and influential trailblazer who has contributed so much to the world.