



# SOCIAL WORKERS AREN'T JUST NATURAL HELPERS — THEY'RE NATURAL LEADERS TOO

A Proud Rutgers School of Social Work  
Alum Shares His Journey from Dishwasher  
in Brower Commons to CEO  
of Three Service Organizations

By **CINDY NIXON**

**E**veryone has a turning point in life. Mike Kaufman, RC'90, SSW'92, has had three that profoundly affected his professional trajectory. The first was when nothing but fate led him to enroll in Rutgers as an undergrad in 1986. With limited funds and minimal guidance on attending college, he ended up opting for in-state tuition at a university he could drive to in his broken-down jalopy. It ended up being the first place that felt like a real home to him, somewhere he could be himself, grow into a more educated and enlightened young man, somewhere he belonged.

The second followed his graduation in 1990 with a B.S. in accounting, when the thought of showing up at Ernst & Young for the coveted starter position he'd landed based on his high performance at Rutgers Business School created a knot in his stomach. "It just didn't feel right," Mike recalls. "I wasn't looking forward to it at all. What felt right was the volunteer work I'd done from sophomore year on through the Rutgers Community Outreach Program."

So his gut led him to Rutgers School of Social Work, where he spent the next handful of years proceeding through a graduate program he relished and internships he found life-altering, earning his MSW in 1992 and then winning a PhD fellowship. As part of the latter, he was required to instruct one course per semester; this first exposure to teaching—to a combination of public speaking and guiding and mentoring others—lit a fire in him that burns to this day.

The third turning point was when Mike happened to chance upon a want ad for a school director-in-training at a private day school for children with special needs in Baltimore. When he got the job with the company that later became known as Specialized Education Services, Inc. (SESI), it changed everything—it launched an ever-advancing career he never could have dreamed of. "There are just moments when people are in the right place at the right time," Mike says. "Getting hired by SESI was my moment." Promoted from principal to regional director to COO from 1998 to 2004, Mike eventually served in the top executive position at the company for 10 years before deciding to leave after a corporate merger.

When Mike talks about his latest accomplishment, the publication of his book *Doing Good & Doing Well: Inspiring Helping Professionals to Become Leaders in Their Organizations* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2023), it's not the release of the book he wants to discuss—it's the message of the book for all of his many colleagues out there working in the helping professions, particularly social work.

That message is, quite simply: Helpers are innately gifted leaders more than capable of rising to the top of their fields. They don't have to either do good in the world or do well in their careers. They can do both, they can have both. They can contribute to the social causes that matter most to them and also lead service-based companies and businesses to organizational and financial success. In Mike's words, social workers are allowed to make a good living on their way to making the world a better place.

"I want my fellow social workers to understand that choosing a career in the social services doesn't have to mean limited wages, visibility, or influence. If you want to—and let it be noted that not every helper wants to, some are completely happy doing fieldwork their whole careers, touching so many individual lives along the way—you can ascend to top-tier positions of leadership that allow you a wider reach and a deeper impact on the populations to whom you're devoted."

Mike's book focuses on the particular aptitudes and abilities helping professionals intrinsically possess that make them natural-born leaders. These include knowing how to de-escalate crises (like correction officers do); handling triage situations (like nurses and

EMTs do); mastering communication skills (like speech-language pathologists do); breaking down barriers to comprehension (like ASL interpreters and tutors do); and formulating medium- and long-range plans (like teachers do with their curriculums).

Furthermore, helpers regularly practice active listening (like counselors and therapists); they're adept at making informed, rational decisions amid high tension (like humanitarian aid workers); they possess a seemingly unlimited well of patience (like autism behavior techs and day care workers); and they're able to relate to and resonate with people from all walks of life (like agency caseworkers, home health aides, and rehab specialists).

Helping professionals have incredible grit and resilience; they're highly emotionally intelligent with a built-in servant leader's mindset; and, in Mike's firm opinion, you won't find a more passionate lot: passionate about their mission, about their role in society, about their unflagging respect for the students, clients, and patients they serve with decency and dignity.

All of these proficiencies—some inherent, some acquired and refined by both formal education and on-the-job training—are essential to skilled leadership and, in Mike's view, matter more to the vitality and vibrancy of an organization than a framed MBA diploma on the wall. That's the message Mike is dedicated to these days, broadcasting it as far and wide as he can to champion helping professionals as organizational leaders.

He doesn't just believe all this; he walks his talks. Throughout his various tenures, he has hired a retired police officer to supervise the behavior program in one of his schools. He hired an athletic coach and watched him blossom as an education division head. He hired a church volunteer to manage one of his offices, and she's now the managing director of an online therapeutic platform.

"I'm a huge advocate of learning on the job," Mike explains, "and keeping that learning going throughout the lifespan. If you honor every role you're in and give it your all—no matter your missteps or misjudgments—you'll take away more than you gave."

For example, "As the CEO of SESI, I learned more than I can say. I learned how critical a professional mentor can be. I learned that I needed to find a balance between my heart and my head if I was going to effectively manage teams and produce results. I learned humility when a board came in and demanded accountability for all my actions; and most especially, I learned that the people are the soul of any company—they're what keeps it alive and growing, so you need to show up and stand up for your people more than anything."

Next came his stint launching a nationwide teletherapy provider. "When I was the CEO of TalkPath Live, I learned how to do things a social worker doesn't normally do: set up payroll and a 401k plan, secure health insurance, implement a functional web platform, and hire people outside my own areas of expertise. It was all very new and very challenging, and I learned that's when we evolve the most: when we add new skills to our portfolio, even when they don't particularly appeal to our sensibilities."

"And now that I'm the CEO of my own special education management and consulting company," Mike continues, referring to Premier Education Partners, or PEP, "I'm experiencing all that it means to be an entrepreneur and business owner—from negotiating building leases to being my own admin to keeping the toilet paper stocked."

But if you ask Mike his greatest teacher, he'll tell you Rutgers. "Most people bleed red," he shares. "I bleed scarlet. The impact Rutgers has had on me—on the man I've become and the career choices I've made—has been immeasurable. I credit this institution for giving me a solid foundation and an exceptional education; from

there, I built a vocation that feels like an avocation. I built a life."

Deeply loyal to the school that first employed him as dishwasher at his College Avenue dining hall and then granted him the opportunities to serve as resident assistant, resident director, on-call crisis interventionist for the Rutgers College Counseling Center, president of his doctoral program, and longtime lecturer, Mike is now deeply committed to sharing the lessons of his life's work with the Rutgers School of Social Work community.

"When I was teaching here (which I very much hope to do again, by the way!), I noticed my students were particularly interested in the leadership arm of what we were discussing in class, more so than my in-the-field social work experience. They wanted to know if they, too, could climb to the top of a company, if they could lead teams and make policy that would transform systems and engender meaningful societal change." How could they do that? How could they adhere to their calling and stay true to their values while also being able to buy a house and drive a nice car?

"That's what inspired my book. That's what led me to write it. It all grew out of my students' questions and their interest in the track to leadership."

Now that the book is done, his three daughters are all off to college or beyond, and his business is running smoothly with his partners, Mike has been reflecting on what he'd like to do next (a mentoring initiative tops his list) and the legacy he'd like to leave the helping fields that have gifted him with an immensely fulfilling career.

"Here's what I'd like to say to the social workers Rutgers School of Social Work has created and is creating, just like it created me: You are compassionate, warm, and accessible. You approach your work and treat all people with fairness and justice. You stand up for what's right, and you prioritize the good of the many over self-interest. That is what this country needs in leaders today more than ever—that is what this world is lacking. You have the tools and the talents. You know how to devise equitable solutions. You're a natural at boosting strengths and mitigating deficits. You don't just make a difference, you are the difference."

Gazing out the window contemplatively—thinking back on a lonely childhood, a path paved with both trials and triumphs, and a work ethic characterized by a whole lot of drive and determination—this career helping professional offers his final words to others who may want to follow in his footsteps: "If people take nothing else from my book or from my story, take this: You are the future. You can shape that future just by being who you were meant to be and following your natural helping instincts, heeding your ingrained helper's mentality. You aren't just enough, you're more than enough. You aren't just good-hearted, you're the heart of humanity. Go make the future better. I'll be right there behind you cheering you on, believing in you like others believed in me. Go make the future better—for all of us." ■

*Michael L. Kaufman, MSW, PhD, earned his bachelor's and master's degrees from Rutgers and is ABD for his doctorate at Rutgers School of Social Work. He earned his PhD in clinical psychology in 1999 from the International University for Graduate Studies while working in the field in various counseling positions in northern New Jersey. To all of his professional endeavors in his 30-year career, he always brings his unique blend of "heart of a social worker" and "head of a business executive," and he lives by the Churchill motto "We make a living by what we get; we make a life by what we give." Doing Good & Doing Well is available wherever books are sold.*