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DOROTHY DAVIDS

1923–2014

City: Gresham, Red Springs

County: Shawano

Dorothy Davids was a respected Native American educator, author, speaker, community organizer, and activist for peace and justice.

Dorothy Davids was born on May 2, 1923, in the town of Red Springs, Wisconsin, just outside of Gresham. She was a member of the Stockbridge-Munsee Mohican Nation. She spent the early years of her childhood on her family's farm. However, the bank foreclosed on the farm during the Great Depression in the 1930s, and they moved into an abandoned lumber camp.

Davids attended the Lutheran Indian Mission, a boarding school in Gresham, where her mother worked. In 1933, the school closed its boarding dormitories, so she transferred to a different local school. She attended Shawano High School for two years before graduating from Bowler High School in 1941. Later that year, Davids pursued a bachelor's degree in education at Central State Teacher's College (now University of Wisconsin–Stevens Point). In 1945, she became the school's first Native American graduate. After graduating, Davids taught elementary and junior high school for 16 years and was known for allowing her students to help run the classroom.

Davids's work pivoted away from the classroom and toward the community in the 1960s. In 1961, she began working in administrative roles for the National Congress of American Indians after attending their conference in Chicago. A year later, she got a job at the American Indian Center in Chicago. There she worked with Native American community members impacted by the federal government's assimilation programs during the Termination Era, such as the Indian Relocation Program. She helped people navigate public transportation, ensured they had work clothes, provided financial guidance, and more. In 1963, Davids earned her master's of science degree in education and human development from the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. That same year, she met her best friend and life partner, Ruth Gudinas.

Davids's work in Chicago caught the attention of the UW–Madison Extension in 1966. She was offered a tenured faculty position as an educational outreach specialist. She worked for UW–Extension for 19 years. This work took her across Wisconsin, helping connect Native grassroots organizations, town boards, county extension offices, and university resources. She focused on helping tribal communities gather the tools they needed to coordinate their own projects. Outside of UW–Extension, Davids dedicated herself to "The Stockbridge-Munsee Historical Project" (Miron 2024), a project of the Mohican Nation Historical Committee, which she co-founded in 1968. The committee was composed entirely of women determined to challenge popular narratives and misconceptions about the Mohican Nation by locating, preserving, and sharing Mohican history. In 1974, the Historical Committee opened the Arvid E. Miller Library-Museum in Bowler, Wisconsin, to house the growing collection of Mohican archives and artifacts.

Davids retired from UW–Extension in 1985. The next year, she moved back to the Stockbridge-Munsee Indian Reservation in Red Springs with Gudinas. In retirement, Davids and Gudinas started an educational consulting project called Full Circle: Education for a Diverse Society. They also established a nonprofit publishing organization, Muh-He-Kon-Neew Press. Together, they made significant contributions to the development of curriculum for and about Native people, especially in K–12 education. They also conducted educational workshops and seminars across the Midwest.

In 2014, Davids received the UW System Certificate of Meritorious Achievement in recognition of her lifelong commitments to education, advocacy, and her community. She died on October 4, 2014.

To learn more, visit womeninwisconsin.org/profile/dorothy-davids



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