

Michael Thornton Retires!





Congratulations

After 30+ years at UW-Madison in the Department of Afro-American Studies, Dr. Michael Thornton is retiring. He leaves with an outstanding record of scholarly achievement, teaching excellence and service to department, the university, and the wider community.



An accomplished Sociologist, Professor Thornton is particularly interested in how people cross racial and cultural boundaries. His research pushes beyond the black-white binary, to explore inter-group relations among people of color, especially African Americans and Asian Americans. He boasts nearly 60 publications, the vast majority single-authored or first authored. Even as he enters retirement, Michael has over half a dozen works in progress or under review for publication.

In addition to his tenure in the Afro-American Studies Department, Dr. Thornton was Faculty Director of the Morgridge Centre for Public Service, twice directed the Asian American Studies Program (where he is also an affiliated faculty member), and co-chaired the Campus Diversity Oversight Committee. These are just few examples of his varied administrative and service contributions to the university.

Professor Thornton created one of the Afro-American Studies Department's only service-learning courses, which allowed students to work directly with local community organizations as part of their course requirements. He worked for many years with the Multi-cultural Learning; and recently received the Chancellor's Excellence in Teaching Award, and the First Wave Outstanding Faculty Recognition Award.

And finally, Michael Thornton's long and varied involvement with the local community is extraordinary, whether working with the Goodman/Atwood Community Center, the Boys & Girls Club, the Madison Fair Housing Committee, the Lussier Community Education Center, the Achievement Accountability Forum, or Schools of Hope - to name just a handful of the many organizations with which he has offered his time and commitment.



In recognition of Michael Thornton's long record of achievement as scholar, colleague, teacher, and friend, the Department of Afro-American Studies offers this tribute from faculty, staff, and students: Some of the Things We Admire and Respect About Michael Thornton:

Michael Thornton has always been a source of support and wisdom for me, both professionally and personally. Among the many things I love and appreciate about him is that he listens--he really listens when I come to him with a problem or just something silly to say. I'm going to miss popping into his office to say hello, or to complain about some real or imaginative thing that's bugging me. Thank you, Michael, for being a good "big brother," great colleague and trusted friend.

SANDY ADELL

I have a tremendous debt of gratitude for Michael Thornton. While there have been many times in which I've had o inconvenience him by asking for advice - he was always gracious enough to not look inconvenienced - ultimately, his best advice I gained from simply having spent years in the office next to his. I learned so much about the instructor/student bond just by overhearing his interactions. I came to understand it as a contract focused on learning and while also preparing young folks to go out into the world. I should have thanked him a long time ago. I would like to take this opportunity now. I wish you the best in your retirement.

Thank you!

ANTHONY

BLACK



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Michael is a generous colleague. He offered to read large chunks of my dissertation as I was struggling to turn it into publishable articles and a book, he did not hold back in his criticism and offered clear and direct commentary as well as concrete advice.

Michael is an engaging and passionate teacher. He mesmerized 200 students a Introductory to Comparative Ethnic Studies course I taught with a guest lecture on Race and Policing. He ended the lecture by challenging students to think of how they could bring about change for the better. Michael's students adore him and it is clear why, he put of himself into his work as educator and they know he cares about them as people.

CHRISTY CLARK-PUJARA

I appreciate how he always used his office door to show his willingness to engage in a conversation. If the door was wide open, I knew he was willing to chat. If there was a small crack in the door, I knew he didn't really want to talk, but he would engage anyway. Professor Thornton was on all three of my graduate committees, and I came to respect how he challenged my thinking without making me feel dumb. He pushed me to think differently about issues around race and culture, and in more nuanced ways about how I approached research, generally. He made me a better scholar. While I now have a Ph.D., but I can't bring myself ever to call him Mike. He will always be Professor Thornton because he has been a true mentor to me.

will always admire the quiet ways he stood up for students. Things happened in the department or around campus, and months later, I would hear about actions he took on my behave or on behave of other students. He never seemed to want recognition but stayed focus on doing what had to be done and, most importantly, doing what was right.

CATASHA DAVIS

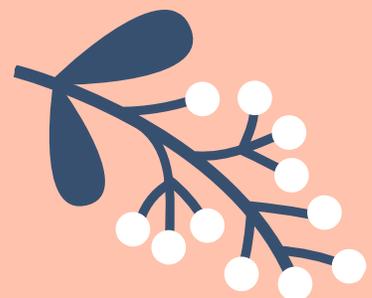
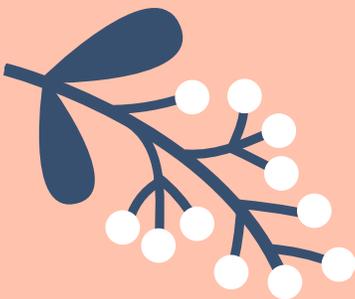


I wish Michael all the best in what he does next. He has been a model of commitment to students, community and the mission of our department. I have not known him long but have witnessed how he would go the extra mile for students as he has for family.

THULANI DAVIS

Though I'm new to the department, I've have been touched and inspired by your dedication to your work and to the Afro-American Studies department. Your generosity through your scholarship fund and your model as a scholar will inform my approaches to scholarship and pedagogy for years to come. Congratulations!

BRITTNEY
EDMONDS



Michael was ever-present in his office, the door slightly ajar, and always willing to be interrupted for just a quick hello or something more pressing. Whether in his office or not, Michael never forgets to check-in and ask how you're doing personally or handling a particularly challenging problem. He was frequently my "go-to" person (especially during my years as chair) when I needed advice about a university policy, a difficult student, or just to vent!

Michael's sustained commitment to racial justice, combined with a deep understanding of the barriers faced by poor and low-income communities, shapes not only his scholarship, but his world-view. It is profound, authentic and inspiring.

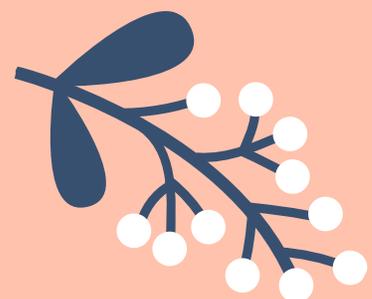
I will never forget a department meeting in which Michael shared the personal rewards he found from his service-learning courses. At the end of each semester he would close his office door, take the pile of student journals and begin reading, frequently finding himself moved to tears by how life-changing their service-learning experiences had been. But Michael's concern for his students extended beyond the classroom. He quietly and without fanfare provided all sort of assistance and support, especially to those in crisis. No wonder he received the Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Teaching!

Michael's extraordinary engagement with the wider community is simply remarkable and awe-inspiring – how does he find the time?

At the risk of sounding a bit frivolous, Michael's disorderly office gave me permission to have a messy office as well!

Congratulations
Mike, for all this and more. We will miss you!

CHRISTINA GREENE



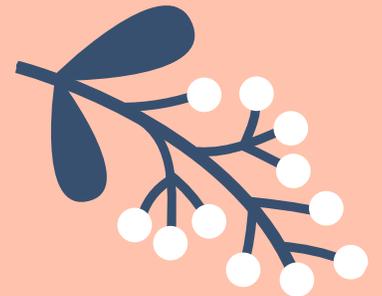
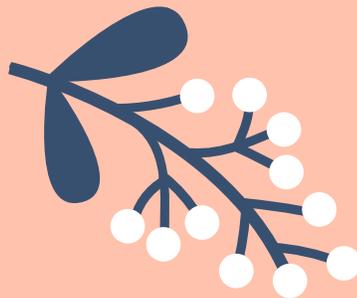
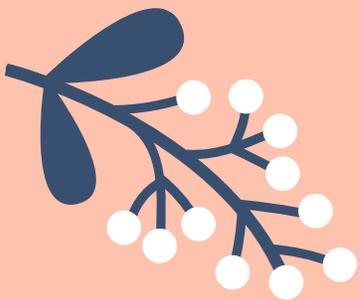
Michael, I didn't have the chance to engage with you much, but you've always made yourself available. Thanks for helping to bring me into the Department!

MOSI IFATUNJI

What

I most admire about Michael Thornton is the way he pushed my thinking within the classes I took with him. I will never forget how he held those of us with racial, economic, and other societal privileges accountable within his Race & Policing course for our role in maintaining this unjust system. He wanted us to understand that while there were obvious institutional and structural forces at work, we were not absolved of personal responsibility. I wish you all the best in retirement Professor Thornton! Thank you for your dedication and work for over three decades within the Afro-American Studies Department, UW-Madison, and the broader community! Any student, undergraduate or graduate, who had the opportunity to take a course with you is better off academically and personally for it.

BRITTANY
JOHNSON



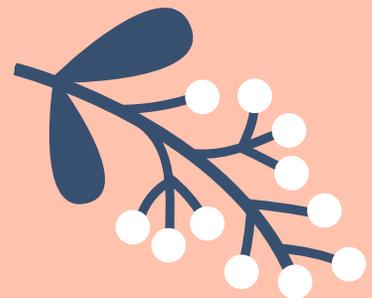
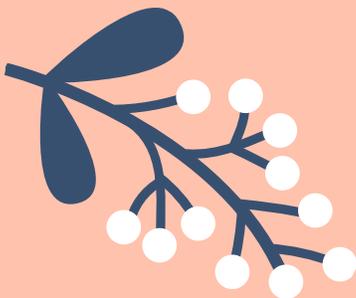
Prof. Thornton was the first person I met on my first work day at the Department. I was being given a tour of the Department by the former Administrator when we crossed paths at the Copy room and when she introduced me to Prof. Thornton, he insisted I address him as Mike, and not Prof. Thornton. Coming from a big Department where a formal address was desired, this felt welcoming and encouraging and I appreciated it.”

In my work interactions with Prof. Thornton, I truly appreciated his ability to listen and his supportive approach with challenging matters and situations.

VENETA KOVACS

Mike-usually a man of few words-but what you said was right on the mark. I enjoyed your sense of humor and great one-liners. Thanks for being a wonderful support to staff, students and faculty through thick and thin!

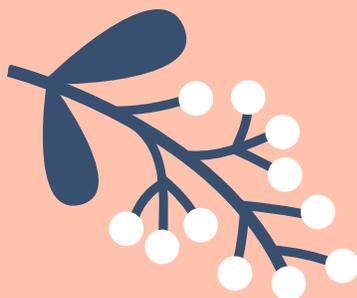
DOLORES
LIAMBA



What I admire about Michael Thornton is his unflappability. Over the decades the department has faced numerous challenges and undergone many changes. Michael has remained cool, calm, and collected through the most trying times and has been a steadying influence on Afro-American Studies.

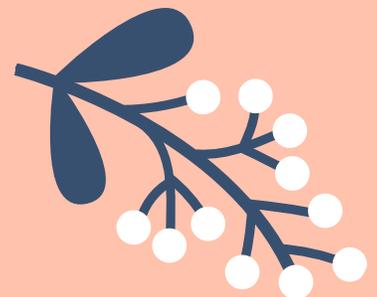
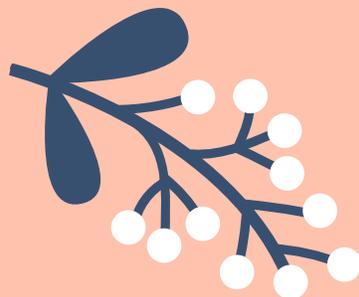
BRENDA GAYLE PLUMMER

When I think of Mike, I am always reminded of an interview he did with The Capital Times, almost exactly two years ago, just after his well-deserved Distinguished Award. It could have been a standard Q&A profile, but, of course, with Mike, it wasn't. Instead, it was an introspective, thoughtful, sometimes searing exploration of what it means to teach ethnic studies. He pulled no punches. He talked about how much resistance he faces from ("I'd say about one-third...") of the students required to take the course and what it means to teach under those circumstances ("That's the challenge and I like the challenge.") That last part - "I like the challenge" - struck me right away, because it was the very next line after outlining the challenge. There was no melancholy, no frustration, no resignation, just determination and a payoff: "It's heartening at the end - a lot of them talk about how the experience has transformed their lives."



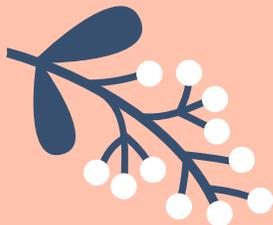
But that wasn't the most moving part of the interview. That was when he talked about the double-edged sword of the ethnic studies requirement. In a few paragraphs, he summarized the teaching challenges as succinctly as I've seen: "[S]tudents of color hold back on what they really feel. And many white students don't have the vocabulary to talk about these things." Those challenges, described in a few words, are what makes the teaching both taxing and invigorating. It would have been easy for Mike to spout platitudes, give streamlined answers that made the conversation easy. But he didn't. Instead, he passionately described his work, what he loves about it, what works and what doesn't, who benefits and who doesn't, how we all try to do our best within a system that doesn't always allow it for ourselves or our students. I cut it out of the newspaper - yes, the good old newspaper - and taped it into the inside of a folder I use for important documents each semester. It's a daily reminder of the reasons I do this work, its perils and limitations, but, most importantly, the joy it brings. Thanks, and congratulations on your retirement.

ALEXANDER SHASHKO



Dear Michael, It has been a joy to work with you over the years. I often stopped by your office to greet you when I was on my way to my office. Those short visits were very important to me, whether we talked about personal or departmental matters. I remain inspired by your sociology courses that span multiracial subjects (African American, Asian American, Latinx, American Indian, Euro-American) and comparative multiethnic representation in newspapers, among others. Whether lecturing, advising your students on service learning projects in the community, or contributing to department meetings and directions, your calm demeanor spoke loudly. When named the Director of the Morgridge Center for Public Service in 2005, you spoke of the students' opportunity to share their resources—the best being themselves, adding, "To me, the Morgridge Center serves the university's most important mission: to broaden our student's understanding of the world, and in so doing, helping them create a better world for all of us" (UW-Madison News, April 29, 2005). Your statement is so true, and so much needed today!! As you taught and mentored students to think critically about "social class, race and privilege, gender and privilege," you significantly advanced important aspects of the mission of the Department of Afro-American Studies. In fact, your Chancellor's Distinguished Teaching Award underscores your value to your students from across the campus, to Afro-American Studies, Asian American Studies, Sociology, community recipients of service learning, and, of course, to the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Michael, your gratification of witnessing and engaging your students' "aha" moments will continue to resonate for many years!! Thank you for challenging and enriching the campus. Congratulations on your achievement, and welcome to a new phase of life. I must warn you that professors may leave university teaching, meetings, administration, and a host of other institutional responsibilities, but they never really retire!!

FREIDA HIGH WASIKHONGO TEFAGIORGIS



I'll miss your constant presence in the department and my ability to knock on your door to ask a question without fearing that my intrusion would not be welcomed. You are often the voice of reason in debates during departmental meetings. I admire your passion for serving the community and hope that we can continue doing that important outreach.

ETHELENE WHITMIRE

Michael, you were always the voice of reason whenever we had meetings. You always swooped in in a calm way whenever there was a problem. In any situation you always made people feel immediately comfortable. And you always protected the staff. I really appreciated it and you will be missed.

NINA AKLI

