



# Selected Papers of William L. White

[www.williamwhitepapers.com](http://www.williamwhitepapers.com)

Collected papers, interviews, video presentations, photos, and archival documents on the history of addiction treatment and recovery in America.

**Citation:** White, W. (2012). Mel Schulstad (1918-2012): A personal tribute a pioneer of modern addiction counseling. *Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly*, 30(2), 256-258. Posted at [www.williamwhitepapers.com](http://www.williamwhitepapers.com)

## Mel Schulstad (1918-2012): A Personal Tribute to a Pioneer of Modern Addiction Counseling

**William L. White**

Emeritus Senior Research Consultant  
Chestnut Health Systems  
[bwhite@chestnut.org](mailto:bwhite@chestnut.org)

On January 6, 2012, the addictions field lost one of its modern pioneers when Mel Schulstad died quietly in his sleep at the age of 93. Mel was born March 9, 1918, in Duluth, MN and was raised by his grandparents in Reynolds, ND before enlisting in the US Army Air Corps in 1939. He flew B-17 bombers over France and Germany from November 1942 to May 1945 and was twice awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for valor in combat. He retired as a full colonel in 1965.

Mel's long career in the addictions counseling field began in the early 1970s following his own recovery from alcoholism. He helped found the alcoholism counselor association in Virginia, and he was the founding president of NAADAC: The Association for Addiction Professionals. Mel was one of the leading figures in the early movement to professionalize addiction counseling and was the personification of the transformative power of addiction recovery.

I have had the privilege of training and mentoring addiction counselors from all over the United States and in other countries for more than four decades. When asked who trained addiction counselors before there were addiction studies programs, addiction counselor certification systems, and training workshops galore, it is hard for me to not think of Mel Schulstad and the role he played in the lives of so many first-generation alcoholism/addiction counselors. No one exerted a greater influence on the emerging practice of addiction counseling than Mel. He was both catalyst and witness of our transition from "paraprofessionals" to addiction professionals. He was the consummate advocate, often working behind the scenes with government officials and legislators on issues affecting the lives of people suffering from addiction, as well as individuals and families in long-term recovery.

Mel's service to NAADAC continued throughout his career and long after his retirement. He helped establish the

NAADAC Archives at the Library of Virginia and co-chaired the fundraising effort to create a permanent headquarters for NAADAC. It is quite fitting that NAADAC's professional of the year award bears Mel's name. For decades, Mel was an indomitable presence at NAADAC conferences where he helped recognize the achievements of those working in the profession he had helped create. Mel made contributions to two influential books (the Foreword to *Under the Influence*, 1984, and co-author of *Beyond the Influence*, 2000).

Long after his official retirement, Mel remained concerned with a broad number of issues affecting the addiction counselor and the larger field of addiction treatment. He continued to push for advanced education and training of addiction counselors even as he worried about very skilled counselors being pushed out of the field because of their lack of academic credentials. In our final discussions and my interviews with him, he often spoke of two concerns.

The first involved language that persisted within the field that he had sought to change for more than 20 years:

*...the worst thing is the nomenclature that we've chosen in this field. We've made "abusers" out of hundreds and thousands of people...that's a very, very detrimental term. We don't use that language with any other medical problem. We don't talk about people who abuse sugar or abuse food. We're the only health care arena in which we lambaste the victim with the title of abusing something. Then we wonder why we're held in such disregard or why Congress doesn't want to flood us with money like they do for other illnesses. Our very nomenclature invites disrespect and contempt (From 2011 Mel Schustad Interview).*

A second of Mel's recent concerns was the rush to integrate addiction and mental health treatment. He felt this posed significant risks to the integrity of specialty sector addiction treatment:

*I see alcoholism and drug dependence being gradually sucked back under what is now being called behavioral health, which includes the mental health field which decades ago did not want us and from which we successfully escaped at least for a while. I think the field will suffer from this new wave of integration. The challenge is going to be to hang onto our historical focus on the care of the suffering alcoholic and addict and his or her family and what we have learned about how to do that. These are in danger of getting lost (From 2011 Mel Schustad Interview).*

Even into his nineties, Mel Schulstad continued to offer his wisdom and encouragement to those of us who regularly sought his counsel, whether professional colleagues or the desperate men and women he met through his volunteer service work. In spite of innumerable professional awards and recognitions, he rarely spoke of what he had achieved—only how much he had been blessed. His was a life of humility and service. The only things that surpassed the duration of his commitment to the field and those it served were the quality of his contributions and his personal integrity. He loved people seeking recovery and those in recovery. He loved addiction counselors. He loved the addictions field. If one were to put a face on the modern era of addiction counseling, it would be the image of Mel Schulstad.