

## **Davida Coady, MD: Maverick, Organizer, Altruist**

**Rabbinic Pastor De Fischler Herman**

Chaplain, Spiritual Director and Sage-ing Mentor

E-mail: [deherman@me.com](mailto:deherman@me.com)

### **Author Note**

The opinions expressed here are those of the author alone. The author has no financial conflicts of interest.

### **Abstract**

In every age of human history, heroes arise who inspire society's citizens with the best of what it means to be human. The lives of such heroes often are marked with extraordinary self-sacrifice. Such was the life and person of Davida Coady. A pediatrician and public health leader who worked extensively with the poor and needy across the globe, Dr. Coady tirelessly worked for social justice and human rights. She always preferred enriching others before enriching herself. She embodied what it means to be a healer. Her inspiring life story ignites the imagination and one's sense of purpose and mission in life. Dedicated to bringing healing to all those in greatest need, both in the United States and across the globe, Dr. Davida Coady is a true hero for our time. Her story challenges individuals and society in general to work with greater self-sacrifice and creative generosity for the healing and well-being of those who are in need.

*Keywords:* pediatrics, public health, social justice, human rights, recovery

### **Introduction**

Davida Coady. Her name may not ring a bell, unless you are connected with one of the multiple social justice programs she initiated and led in the developing world or in her beloved hometown of Berkeley, California. Who was this woman and why is it important for us to know her? What does her life and work tell us about ourselves? How might her spirit infuse ours with similar altruism, compassion and energy to heal the wounds in our own communities as well as in famine and disease-riddled places far from here?

### **Birth, Upbringing & Education**

She was born Davida Taylor, a coal miner's daughter, in April 1938 in Berkeley --- the only live child of her poorly educated, blue collar parents. Her mother, after multiple miscarriages and stillbirths, gave birth to Davida at age 48. Her father had left the mines and worked the rest of his life for UC Berkeley --- "Cal" --- where his gregarious nature connected him to many professors. Davida's exposure to the rich academic environment opened her mind to worlds beyond the confines of home. Growing up, Davida struggled with school, with her mother, and with making friends. An invitation during eighth grade to become the school representative for the Red Cross gave the teenager a camp training experience away from home. This seminal

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moment instilled in Davida a sense of her life's purpose: "I wanted to be a social worker, I wanted to save people...serving the less fortunate, doing good." (Coady, 16)

Neither poor grades at Berkeley High School nor discouraging words from her guidance counselor could dissuade Davida from aiming for a college education. During her undergraduate years at College of the Pacific, an unexpected stint at a camp for diabetic children connected the budding activist with two doctors, both women, who encouraged Davida and supported her aspirations to go to medical school. Her process of choosing a school reveals a lot about her character.

Deciding to forego offers from several California universities and never having traveled outside her home state, Davida hopped on a Greyhound bus and headed to New York to pursue an application to Columbia, which offered an unconventional experience that beckoned her: a fourth-year elective in Africa. She had a gift for connecting with the right people. By the time Davida's return bus ride landed her back in Berkeley, an acceptance letter from Columbia was waiting.

The product of a working-class background, Davida was an outsider at Columbia, surrounded by elitist students from Ivy League universities who had never held a job. Additionally, being a female medical student in the early 60's meant sexist treatment by professors. Yet, staying focused on the desire to do the greatest good for the greatest number, Davida's passion, idealism and sheer force of will fueled her passage through the rigorous years of medical training, including flunking out and having to repeat her second year. She received her medical degree from Columbia in 1965 and, later, a master's in public health from Harvard.

Davida's fourth-year elective landed her in Liberia, where she attended to sick children, performed surgeries and saved lives. She became close friends with the native people and learned a profound lesson about public health, namely that many diseases are treatable and many deaths are preventable. People do not need a lot: clean drinking and bathing water, nutritious food, protection against viruses and bacteria, etc. Coupled with education, these survival basics form the prevention-oriented approach that is public health. Being an activist and educator would be instrumental to her effectiveness as a public health physician in the developing world as well as in the United States.

### Third World Medicine

Davida was a "hippie" before the term was coined. Her free-spirited and inquiring nature led her to public health service in Guatemala, Biafra, Haiti, India, Nicaragua, Honduras, Liberia, Bangladesh, Thailand, Uganda, El Salvador, Ethiopia and the U.S., working among the malnourished, the poor, refugees and addicts. In Haiti she worked on the Harvard tuberculosis project. In war torn, famine-plagued Biafra, she nearly was killed trying to save starving children. After the Peruvian earthquake in 1970, Davida was politically appointed the Peace Corps' medical director, yet served only briefly in that role when the Nixon administration learned of her voter registration with the leftist Peace and Freedom Party.

Though no longer its medical director, Davida took a Peace Corps position training medical volunteers in Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean until loneliness

and travel fatigue propelled her for a time back to California. At the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), she taught pediatrics and community medicine; and she joined the United Farm Workers' union organizing efforts led by Cesar Chavez, involving her students in rotations for the union's free clinic. Splitting her time between adjunct teaching at UCLA and field assignments, Davida also worked on smallpox eradication in India.

Later, she returned to India to work with Mother Teresa in her hospice, tuberculosis hospital and family clinic. Ever the organizer, Davida expanded Mother Teresa's successful, though limited, family planning program by linking it with USAID's World Food Program, resulting in thousands of



women participating. Although Mother Teresa showed no interest in Davida's appeal to support the boycott of Nestlé infant formula in poor countries, the good doctor took it on as a cause when she returned to UCLA. Advancing the argument that contaminated water mixed with the formula would sicken babies, Davida advocated for breastfeeding as the safer, healthier and least costly way to nourish infants. Davida got the support she sought from the renowned pediatrician Dr. Benjamin Spock and actors Ed Asner and Linda Kelsey.



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Parenthetically, it is important to note that, despite the efforts of Davida and other activists, breastfeeding vs. infant formula remains, four decades later, a heated topic. In 2012, New York's Mayor Michael Bloomberg launched a campaign called Latch On NYC to support breastfeeding and push hospitals to cease distributing gift packs of formula to new mothers.

While Davida served on the board of Concern America, a California-based non-governmental organization doing international relief work, she connected with celebrities Mike Farrell, Martin Sheen and Bianca Jagger who were engaged in humanitarian causes. Simultaneously, Davida served as medical director of the Venice Family Clinic in southern California which, she proudly noted, is now the largest free clinic in the nation. After an upheaval with Concern America's board, Davida and Martin founded the San Carlos Foundation to provide health and educational assistance to refugees and impoverished people in developing countries, particularly Central America.

### Personal Struggles and Triumphs

As focused and effective as Davida was in her vocation, she struggled with intimate relationships as well as with a tendency toward depression and a proclivity for alcohol. During college and medical school years and for decades that followed, her desire for a true love relationship went unfulfilled. In her mid 30's she married Pat Coady, an Irish Catholic ex-priest who also had an affinity for drinking. About her relationships she wrote, "I attached to...very inappropriate people, especially when I was drunk, who were fun and free-spirited and liked to travel." (Coady, 180). The marriage ended in divorce and, only many years later, did Davida come to accept that she was an alcoholic. She sought help and, many relapses notwithstanding, finally got sober. During those years Davida also grappled with her desire to have a child, attempting at various times artificial insemination and adoption. In this realm she was unsuccessful.

Davida did finally find true love in what would be a most unusual way. In her late 50's she took up working with the courts to help addicts get into treatment programs

rather than jail. One day a judge asked Davida to speak to Tom Gorham, a smart yet homeless, toothless man in a lot of trouble. Tom had been arrested hundreds of times for alcohol and drug abuse. After many false starts, Tom worked his way through Options Recovery, Davida's diversion program. He got clean, sober and educated and joined the staff as an addiction



counselor. Davida, at 64, and Tom, 11 years her junior, married. Together they expanded the Options program into California prisons, succeeding in getting lifers out of prison where other attempts failed.

## Effective Altruism

Davida was energized when treating sick people, organizing community health initiatives and demonstrating for social justice issues. She testified at Senate hearings convened by Senator Ted Kennedy. She was arrested, by her estimate, more than 50 times protesting nuclear arms concerning Central America. Material wealth did not appeal to her, as she wrote, “Money has never driven me.” (Coady, 109). Without hesitation, Davida would pay for a child’s surgery or education. She sponsored people from Africa and brought them to the United States for training. She offered lodging to those needing a place to stay until they could get on their feet. Altruism fueled her. Altruism, according to the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley, is “...when we act to promote someone else’s welfare, even at a risk or cost to ourselves.” (Greater Good Science Center). Davida acknowledged her fears, particularly during stormy airplane trips, yet, she “...was at ease with risking my life for a good cause.” (Coady, 386)



The young radical would challenge the status quo wherever she served, if she could find a way to make it better and called out social injustice whenever she saw it. Davida writes in her diary:

I’ve always been a reformer, and any job I’m given I try to rethink it, and make sure there isn’t a way to improve it. Patients in those days tended to be treated a little like cattle, and I wondered what it was like for a patient and his or her parent to arrive at the pediatric outcall clinic. I sat in the waiting room one afternoon for an hour or two, talking to parents, and then followed patients through the outcall system. I digested it, and then suggested changes to the department head. (Coady, 76)

Davida’s character strength intimidated some of the doctors she would encounter, such as when she served as chief resident at the UCLA hospital. It was the late 1960’s while the Vietnam War was raging, and the pacifist pediatrician authorized the ward to treat two war-injured Vietnamese children, which “led to one of the biggest fights the hospital had seen.” (Coady, 77)

### Respected Elder



Davida maintained the life-long conviction “...that one should leave the world a better place than one found it, and that our lives are worth very little if we don’t do something to make the world better.” (Coady, 385) Near her life’s end, having advanced cancer, she declared in her memoir that she “...didn’t want to be a social worker...” and “...never wanted to be seen as squishy or a do-gooder...” and would rather have been called a “fighter.” (Coady, 386) While those sentiments seem to contradict the ideals she espoused in her youth, they may well be the product of Davida’s ripening into maturity. By the end of her life, Davida achieved the status of something each of us desires: respected elder. The truth is she did far more good than even the best altruists of us can ever hope to achieve.

Davida Coady’s memoir, **The Greatest Good**, was published by Hesperian Health Guides shortly before her death on May 3, 2018.

## THE GREATEST GOOD



≡ A Memoir ≡

**Davida Coady**

Hesperian Health Guides  
Options Recovery Services  
San Carlos Foundation

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### Editor's Note

The Journal is honored that the Coady/Gorham family, Hesperian Health, and Options Recovery donated the free use of the photographs found in this article.

Our readers are encouraged to explore Dr. Coady's published diary, *The Greatest Good*, on the Hesperian Health Guides website. Information can be gained for obtaining a copy of her diary at the website: [https://store.hesperian.org/prod/The\\_Greatest\\_Good.html](https://store.hesperian.org/prod/The_Greatest_Good.html).