

Joseph A. Whitener
1925-1985



Joe Whitener was a graduate of Wofford College and served as a pilot in the U.S. Air Force during World War II. He received his Masters degree in Social Work from the University of North Carolina and began work with the VA in 1953. His first position was in Roanoke, Virginia. He later worked at the Salisbury VA and his first Chiefs job was at the Tuscaloosa VA. While at Tuscaloosa from 1963 to 1972, he wrote a proposal for a half million dollar veterans program for the Alabama Commission of Mental Health. In 1972, Joe was sent to Israel to present the program to the International Congress of Social Psychiatry. The program was still in effect at the time of his death.

In 1972, Joe became the first Chief of Social Work at the newly opened Tampa VA Hospital. The social work staff quickly grew to over 45. Many social workers who wished to move into leadership positions would transfer to Tampa because of Joe's reputation as a mentor and educator. Eight of his staff became Chiefs of Social work in the VA, and one of those became a medical center director. He constantly encouraged staff to challenge themselves professionally and personally. One of his clerical staff is now a Human Resource Staffing Specialist, and another went back to school, received her MSW, and is now a Social Work Team Leader.

Joe was an innovative thinker who could easily put ideas into action. His skills as a communicator and negotiator made it possible for his staff to begin and lead new programs that directly benefited veterans.

One of Joe's greatest contributions to the VA system was as a Social Work Administrative Leadership Training (SWALT) Preceptor. His high energy level, superb communication skills, and ability to motivate made him the consummate mentor. During the time he was a SWALT Preceptor, there was a high expectation that graduates of the program would take leadership positions throughout the system. It was an inside joke that SWALT really stood for "Satisfy Whitener And Leave Town."