# *Sapere Aude* — Dare to Be Wise: 07 David A. Sleet

## CHILDHOOD

**Full name: David Allen Sleet**

***Tell me about where you were born and how you grew up.***

I was born the youngest of three children in Brighton, Michigan, October 27, 1942. By the time I was born, World War II was in full swing. I think we even had a small Victory Garden in the front yard where we lived in Grand Rapids, Michigan. I remember being told that duct tape was invented that year, mostly to protect ammunition cases from water penetration during the war. My life growing up was full of snow and lots of cousins and relatives. My great-grandfather (Marshall P. Sleet) was a tobacco farmer in Warsaw, Kentucky and my maternal grandfather (A.A. LeBlanc) – a relative of civil rights activist Homer Plessy – worked in a cigar factory in New Orleans before establishing the largest dry-cleaning business in Grand Rapids.

***What did your parents do for a living?***

My dad was an accomplished musician, composer, and band and orchestra conductor. His BA and MA were in music education and he studied under the famous band director, William D. Revelli, at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. We moved to San Diego, California when he was offered a position as music coordinator for a large school district. My mother was an English literature major at the University of Michigan, (where my parents met), and later, she was a homemaker.

***What about your education? What kind of environment did you grow up in?***

I attended public schools in San Diego after arriving in California at age six. In elementary school, my teachers would send home reports that David "Talks, Talks, Talks." My father, Marshall C. Sleet, was the instrumental music coordinator and educator for the La Mesa-Spring Valley School District and would rotate around elementary schools teaching children how to play various instruments. That's how I was introduced to music and took private lessons in percussion at an early age. Later, in middle school, I was in the school band which was directed by my father! Upon his death, the school district dedicated a new music building in his name.

Both parents valued higher education but I was the only sibling who attended college. We were raised reading the Encyclopedia Britannica, a 12-piece set which my mom bought from a door-to-door salesman. Actually, I still have them all. I probably got a thirst for knowledge and an interest in science by reading that encyclopedia set. Because my father was a middle school teacher, I always had great respect for teachers and became one myself. You know what they say about teaching: "*It's not rocket science… it's harder*."

***What were your interests in high school?***

I was interested in music, sports, and science. I was first chair in the percussion section of the band and orchestra, lettered in gymnastics, and took science classes in chemistry, health, and biology. I still have a paper I wrote – "Why I want to be a Biologist." Although that never happened, it opened my eyes to the exciting world of science, and how one person could make a difference through research. I did my own personal research on the lives of Albert Schweitzer (who was also a musician and

scientist), Thomas Edison, and Jonas Salk. Later in my career, I had the opportunity to meet with, and interview, B.F. Skinner (at Harvard) and Viktor Frankl (in Vienna).

## EDUCATION

***Tell me about your experiences getting your undergraduate degree. (i.e., BA/BS, undergraduate degree, college).***

I took a rather unconventional path in my own professional education, trying out different disciplines in college until I landed in health education and psychology. At San Diego State University (SDSU), I majored in psychology and minored in health science, but took undergraduate courses in marketing, advertising and public relations, exercise science, recreation, and anthropology until eventually I got a BA in social psychology with a minor in health and exercise science. Whereas I was interested in all facets of psychology, I decided not to pursue clinical psychology, but instead, focus on using psychology to promote high level wellness, something that is now commonly referred to as "positive psychology," or "health psychology," and sometimes "behavioral medicine."

***What inspired you to get your master's degree? (i.e., MA. MS, MPH, master's degree, college).***

I was inspired by the behavioral and health science literature emerging at the time. Early research in health behavior by Albert Bandura, Howard Leventhal, Mayhew Derryberry, Aaron Antonovsky, Godfrey M. Hochbaum, Leo Baric, and Ira "Rusty" Rosenstock, as well as behavioral medicine research by Greg C. Stone, Stephen Weiss, and Joseph Matarazzo got me thinking more about the possibilities of integrating health with psychology. What interested me most was the possibility of applying behavioral and social science to improve public health. Studying advertising and social marketing taught me that if you could use psychology to motivate people to buy junk food and smoke cigarettes, then why not use those same principles to help people exercise, eat more healthful foods, and quit smoking? So, I enrolled in a master's program at SDSU to that end, with an emphasis on exercise, health, and psychology. I received my MA in exercise science in 1968 with a thesis entitled "Somatotype and Social Image."

***Were there professors, mentors or advisors that made an impression on you during this time?***

I learned from many people along the way, including professors and colleagues at SDSU – Fred Kasch, who directed the adult fitness program, J.E. Lindsay Carter who ran an anthropometry lab, and Rosalind Feierabend and William Hillix in psychology who were conducting research on achievement motivation – they were my primary mentors and advisors. They all had federal grants (i.e., National Institutes of Health [NIH], National Science Foundation [NSF], Department of Defense [DoD]) that I was able to be a part of. Of course, I also received inspiration from the works of the leaders in health education like Lawrence W. "Larry" Green, Horace G. "Ho" Ogden, Sigrid E. Deeds, Marshall Kreuter, Dennis Tolsma, Clarence E. Pearson, and Michael E. Palko.

***What lessons would you say you learned from them that have influenced your educational and professional development?***

I learned the importance of honesty and integrity from them. What I had to learn on my own was the significance of a graduate education like mine and the need for determination and perseverance to complete

it. To put a fine point on that value, this is what a fellow student shared with me: "*I have learned that there is no use in complaining about how much debt I have to pay back. I can either spend the next 100 months in a bad mood whenever I write a student loan check (that takes a quarter of my salary) or I can think of it as the repayment to the best investment anyone can make – education."* All my mentors were strong leaders, and I saw how passionate they were about their research and fostering research skills in students. You have to be passionate about your work – it occupies so much of your life.

***Now tell me about your doctorate work. Again, what inspired you to go on, instead of getting a job out of your master's degree (i.e., doctorate, college).***

My experience teaching as a graduate teaching assistant (GTA) at SDSU added to my commitment to public health. I just loved teaching. But, I realized that I would need more education if I wanted to teach and do research at the college level. So, I applied to several schools and selected the PhD program at the University of Toledo (Ohio) – a new program that focused on what they called "Bioergokinetics." For me, this involved a doctoral program in the combined fields of health education, exercise science and health psychology. It was a blended program allowing me to take coursework in health education, kinesiology, psychology, philosophy, and education. It provided me an opportunity to receive credit for courses at Bowling Green State University, the University of Michigan, and Washington University in St. Louis. I wanted that flexibility. I received my doctorate in 1973 and my dissertation was entitled "Motor Learning and Consolidation Theory."

***What factor or set of actors contributed to your pursuing an academic career and becoming a researcher?***

I'll answer that with a story about a public health professional who was attending a cocktail party in New York. An investment banker she met there asked her "So what do *you* do for a living?" "I'm in public health" she said. "Oh, that's interesting" he replied. "What do you make doing that?" he asked. "I make a difference" she said. "How about you?" I think that is what public health is all about – making a difference. It seemed to me at the time that research could be one way to do that.

Dr. William "Bill" Foege tells the story that when he first came to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as its director in 1977, he would walk around the offices on campus and notice a lot of young people at work – some with head bandanas on, others with long hair and tie-dyed shirts. He asked himself, "What would attract these people to work at CDC?" After interviewing a few of them, he concluded it was because they believed they could make a difference.

***Were there professors, mentors or advisors that made an impression on you during this time?***

Yes, there were many – Bruce Simons-Morton, Donald C. Iverson at NIH, Irwin M. "Rusty" Rosenberg, and Lloyd Kolbe at CDC, Dean Maxwell Howell at SDSU, Rod McClure, Peter Howat, John Lowe, and Charles Watson in Australia, David Corbin at the University of Toledo, Marcel Hebbelinck in Belgium, Louis Francescutti in Canada, Bruce Bigelow and Pete Ziegler at the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), and Bob Kaplan at UC San Diego – all come to mind. Frankly, what would any of us have accomplished without mentors who believed in us and took

the time to mentor and nourish us? I think it was in a letter Sir Isaac Newton wrote in 1675 where he said, "*If I have seen further [than others], it is by standing on the shoulders of giants."* That has certainly been true for me.

Who in public health has made the greatest impression on me? One is William "Bill" Foege, MD, the 10th director of the CDC, former executive director of the Carter Center, a global health advisor to the Gates Foundation, and the person credited with devising the global strategy that led to the eradication of smallpox. Dr. Foege once said, "*There is something better than science, that is, science with a moral compass, science that contributes to social equity, science in the service of humanity."* It couldn't have been said any better than that.

***What lessons would you say you learned from them that have influenced your educational and professional development?***

One thing I learned is that discovery without delivery does not advance public health. For example, what good is it to discover a life-saving vaccine if you can't get it into arms? Implementation failure can be one reason why so many otherwise effective interventions don't succeed. I came to realize that health behavior change interventions and implementation strategies need to be theory-based to succeed. I have tried to build that into my own research and with my work on injury prevention for the *Guide to Community Preventive Services*.

***Tell me about the relationship you had with your major advisor***.

I have had several major advisors along the way. Not all have been related to theses or dissertation supervision. Virginia Voeks, Ralph Grawunder, Elizabeth Lynn, and J.E. Lindsay Carter at SDSU, and John N. Drowatzky, Jan Broekhoff, and John Burt at the University of Toledo were instrumental in my advancements. My advisors and supervisors were tough – as they should be. When they wanted more from me and I didn't think I had any more to give, they encouraged me to persevere. What I remember most, however, is that in every case there was a mutual respect for one another.

***Tell me about what you studied as a student, and what led you down that path.***

I focused on how to motivate behavior change in health and on the use of behavioral and social science theories to advance public health (e.g., Stages of Change). As a psychologist, I understood public health and medical science from that perspective. Whereas behavioral medicine wasn't my thing (too clinical), I came to appreciate the importance of cues in predisposing behaviors. Cues can be the first domino in a chain reaction, setting the stage for either negative or positive health behaviors. For example, removing the cue of ashtrays from restaurants, or posting cues at elevators to "use the stairs – burn 100 calories." B.F. Skinner once told me in an interview that he turns off his office lights when he feels unproductive. So, I thought the best way to understand these phenomena would be to study social and applied psychology, which I did. If it is true in public health that the community is our patient, then we should learn as much as we can about how to change public behaviors. Using social engineering and behavioral economics can play a role in making healthy choices be the easiest choices.

**PROFESSIONAL LIFE**

***Let's move beyond your education time and talk about your career.***

After graduate school, I returned to SDSU as an Assistant Professor, teaching various courses in health science. I also received a California Teaching Certificate which helped prepare me for teaching. I pursued an interest in academic sports psychology, but had only a short career there when I realized that psychologists were being used to help coaches win games rather than to serve the needs of athletes. I also served a brief stint as a journalist, once as the White House correspondent for *Shape Magazine* during the Reagan administration.

I co-authored and published my first government research report in 1967 on "Need Achivement, Coerciveness, and Political Unrest: A Cross-National Analysis" for the U.S. State Department. My first journal article was in 1969 in the *California Journal of Educational Research* on friendship determinants of sixth-grade school campers. Another publication that year was my MA thesis published in *Perceptual and Motor Skills*. My first book was the *Interdisciplinary Research Index on (Children's) Play* in 1971.

Because of my background in health and sport, I was recruited to help conduct somatotype, personality, and health research on athletes at the 1976 Montreal Olympic Games as part of the Montreal Olympic Games Anthropologic Project (MOGAP), funded by the U.S. and Canadian governments. That led to several publications.

As an Associate Professor (and eventually Full Professor) in health science and co-founder of the Graduate School of Public Health at SDSU, I took a leave-of-absence to join the U.S. Department of Transportation, specifically, NHTSA, in Washington D.C. as a research psychologist and public health advisor. The one-year leave lasted for four years! This is where I was schooled on traffic injury as the leading cause of death for Americans ages 1-34.

I later became a visiting professor/fellow and acting director of a research unit on traffic injury prevention at the University of Western Australia, with a half-time appointment in the Disease Control Branch of the State Health Department. In 1991, I joined the Technical Research Centre of Finland as a research fellow in road transportation and published the first paper ever on the benefit of airbags on preventing injuries and deaths in Finland. These results led the Finnish government to waive an import tax on airbag-equipped cars, saving consumers thousands of dollars and increasing the sales of cars in Finland with airbags.

In 1993, I joined the CDC as a behavioral scientist at the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control (NCIPC), with half time in school health at the National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. I served as the Acting Director of the Division of Unintentional Injury Prevention at NCIPC for two years until I was transitioned into the role of Associate Director for Science, where I served for 20 years until my retirement in 2016. During eight of those years, I was on the teaching faculty at Emory University Rollins School of Public Health in the Division of Behavioral Sciences and Health Education in Atlanta, Georgia.

My research covered the gamut of injury, traffic injury, health promotion, child and adolescent health, behavioral theory, mental health, lifestyle medicine, homelessness, and public health. I was fortunate to work with talented co-investigators like Andrea Gielen, Lawrence W. "Larry" Green, John Elder, John Allegrante, and Krista Cole at the *Community*

*Guide*, Laura Trifiletti and Tho Bella Dinh-Zarr at NTSB, Tamara Haegerich at NIH, Margie Peden at the World Health Organization (WHO), Christine Branche at the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), The Global Burden of Disease Collaborators, and CDC/NCIPC scientists like Grant Baldwin, Robin Lee, Jeff Sacks, Ann Dellinger, Ruth Shults, Jim Mercy, Doug Roehler, Dave Ederer, and Mick Ballesteros.

***What has been your proudest research or other professional accomplishment to date?***

I am most proud of my injury prevention research, particularly the systematic reviews prepared for the *Guide to Community Preventive Services*. The alcohol review documented that over 1600 lives could be saved annually if the U.S. lowered its blood alcohol concentration (BAC) standard for drivers from 0.10% to 0.08%. In a letter in 2000 from the White House to our team, President Clinton acknowledged that our research was pivotal in his decision to sign a bill that changed the national standard to 0.08%. Now, I participate as a co-founder of the *.05 Coalition to Save Lives*, a similar effort to reduce the BAC even further, to 0.05%. (https://www.05saveslives.org), Oh, I can't forget the book I co-edited in 2006 with Andrea Gielen and Ralph DiClemente, which I am very proud of – the first book of its kind on behavioral science theories, methods, and applications in injury and violence prevention.

***Were there any projects or studies you thought would lead to something interesting, that just did not pan out?***

One project I tried to get off the ground as Acting Director of the Division at CDC was a program that would fund dissertations on injury prevention topics. We put the announcement out, but nobody applied. The administration subsequently dropped the idea. I later succeeded, however, in funding the Society for Public Health Education (SOPHE) to start an Injury Prevention Fellowship program for students, which is now in its 20th year.

***Tell me about your philosophy that guides your research chain of inquiry and your other academic pursuits***

After thoroughly digesting the injury prevention literature during the period of 1960-1980, it was clear that the use of behavioral and social science theories and methods in injury prevention had not developed on pace with their use in disease prevention and health promotion; yet, their application to preventing injury was equally important. I knew that injuries were largely predictable and preventable when using evidence-based strategies and that behavioral factors were known contributors to injuries and could be modified. So, I came to my own philosophy about this -- whereas structural and environmental approaches have traditionally been associated with the greatest potential to prevent injuries, it is rarely feasible to achieve injury reductions without some element of behavior change. For example, children have to wear their helmet, even with a law in place; people need to change the batteries in smoke alarms to maintain protection; parents must make sure gates on four-sided pool fencing are closed and locked; everyone needs to replace lids on child-resistant medicines after each use. I call these examples "active approaches to passive protection."

***Inasmuch as you have been successful in disseminating your research, what advice do you have for young professionals who struggle?***

In your research, recognize that evidence is not enough. It might tell you what to do, but you also need to know how to implement and disseminate the evidence. It's a bit like having a life-saving vaccine, but no syringes. It's the gap between discovery and delivery, and it's real. As you plan a research project, plan also how you might disseminate the results when they come in. It's not enough to just publish the results, it must be disseminated to those who can use it. I use the term "secondary marketing" to describe this process. For instance, if you publish an article on the effectiveness of swimming lessons to prevent drowning, do secondary marketing of the results to parent magazines, swim schools, and YMCAs. I also like the phrase Lawrence W. "Larry" Green coined "*If we want more evidence-based practices, we need more practice-based evidence."*

***What single best piece of advice would you pass along to a new investigator or student researcher-in-training today?***

First, I would say that we all make sacrifices in building our careers. Long days, late nights, and many years pushing against impossible odds. You can't achieve these things without the support of your colleagues, mentors, and family and friends. Keep them close by – you'll need their advice and encouragement along the way. Secondly, try to find a teacher or fellow grad student doing research in your topic area volunteer to assist them by doing literature searches, collecting data, in analysis, or in writing-up the results. If your contributions are sufficient, ask to be a co-author. It can jump-start your research and publishing career.

***Describe the most courageous thing you have had to do in your academic career – perhaps something that put you at risk for the sake of standing up for a principle***.

I was once the co-editor of *The World Report on Traffic Injury Prevention*, published by the WHO in 2004. We had sub-committees responsible for drafting chapters. One chapter I was assigned to edit was on effective interventions. The sub-committee that drafted it was chaired by a respected professor overseas. I received the draft and as I reviewed the chapter, I noticed that the section on bicycle-related injuries did not include a word about the use of life-saving helmets. Because the omission was unacceptable, I quickly added a few paragraphs about helmet effectiveness and sent the chapter back to the committee chair. He got so angry that he sent a nasty letter to WHO claiming that I had changed the language of his chapter to make it "U.S.-centric." This person was well known to have an anti-helmet position and felt that promoting helmet use would reduce bicycling (it doesn't). I had to defend my actions to the coordinator of the project in Geneva. We decided to have another reviewer make the revisions and include some of the helmet-effectiveness data. To that end, the changes satisfied the sub-committee chair, and the chapter was published with data on the effectiveness of helmets.

***When your professional career ends, how would you like to be remembered?***

Even though I am retired, I don't see an end to my professional career – at least, not yet. But let's say if I did, I would hope others would see my contributions as helping to save lives and improve the quality of life through injury prevention. When Dr. Tom Frieden was head of CDC, he asked all of us

to demonstrate how our work was having an impact. Our grantees had to show impact, and so did we. In my own case, whether it was getting a standard passed for cigarette lighters to be child-resistant, providing research evidence that led to more airbags in Finnish cars, or systematic reviews that led to a new national standard reducing the legal blood alcohol level of drivers, I would hope to be remembered for fighting for evidence-based solutions to the injury problem, and for efforts to incorporate behavioral and social science approaches into injury prevention research and practice.

***Professionals in any field have been known to say there is a price for success. To what extent has that been your experience in the academic world?***

It is possible to be a good scientist and also be a good human being. Sometimes the price you pay for success is to lose some of that humanity. Striving for more-and-more academic recognition in your chosen profession can lead to an obsession at the expense of a balanced personal and social life. I have tried to obtain that balance myself, but haven't always succeeded. I have seen others for whom that balance was nearly impossible to find. Recognize that you control these choices, and it is possible to be a scientist and still have a rich and exciting personal life outside of academia.

Working in the public sector doing public service has its ups and downs. I survived in the federal government through six presidents, ten Department of Health and Human Services secretaries, seven CDC directors and acting directors, ten Injury Center directors, and six Division Directors. Personally, I found that working in public service at CDC and NHTSA to be a noble cause, and a privilege. I think Martin Luther King once asked, "*What are you doing for others*?' Public service is one answer. If you're like me, you do your work because it is a calling, not just because it's a career.

**LIFE OUTSIDE OF ACADEMIA**

***Who are the people outside of your professional world who have impacted your life and what have some of those impacts been?***

My wife, Louise Gobron, a talented applied linguistics and English as a second language (ESL) teacher, has been a wonderful life-partner and has added immense joy to my life outside of academia and government service. My sister, Marcia, and her two daughters, my two half- brothers, Jeff and Todd, my cousin Penny and her family, my grandmother who emigrated from Canada, and Louise's extended family all have taught me the importance of unconditional love and acceptance as a fundamental necessity for a full life. I am an uncle to many children, big and small, which I love. I learned from those relationships that there are three keys to happiness: (1) someone to love; (2) something to do; and (3) something to look forward to.

My parents also had a big impact on me. They not only taught me discipline and the importance of hard work, but also humility, kindness, and empathy. My mother died from MS at age 46 leaving my father to raise three children on his own; but, whether in thick or thin, he got through it. I have seen other families like ours sacrifice much, yet survive under the most challenging situations. That left a lasting impression on me that courage, faith, and commitment can get you through the roughest of times.

***What are some leisure time activities for which you have a passion?***

I like working with wood. I like the smell of fresh-cut wood, the beauty of the grains, the

ease of building with wood – chairs, benches, stools, boxes, and practical furniture. I marvel at what professional woodworkers can do with the right tools and with a vision for building something beautiful, yet practical. I am not there yet, but it is an avocation of mine.

***If you could spend an evening with anyone, living or dead, contemporary character or historical figure, who would it be and what would you want to talk about?***

Bill Gates, Warren Buffett, Peter G. Peterson, and Michael Bloomberg. We would talk about strategies for engaging private foundations and wealthy individuals, like themselves, in financing disease prevention/health promotion efforts, and improving public health infrastructure.

***If you weren't doing what you are doing career-wise, what would you be doing?***

I would go back to playing drums in rock and jazz groups. I supported myself through college playing weekend gigs for weddings, school dances, nightclubs, and at piano bars. But I haven't played professionally for the past 30 years, and I miss it.

***Which three books outside of academia would you recommend for others to read and why?***

*Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* by Yuval Noah Harari – translated from Hebrew, the book explores the ways in which biology and history have defined us and what it means to be "human." He contends that Homo sapiens came to dominate the world because it is the only animal species that can cooperate flexibly in large numbers. *Timothy Leary: A Biography* by Robert Greenfield – interesting not only for its documentation of the 1960s "Turn on, Tune in, Drop Out" psychedelic drug culture, but also because it tells the story of how Professor Dorothy Nyswander, a behavioral scientist considered to be the mother of health education, had a prominent role in Leary's graduate education serving on his dissertation committee at UC Berkeley. Incidentally, her daughter, Marie Nyswander, is known for developing methadone treatment for heroin addiction. *No Breathing Room: The Aftermath of Chernobyl* by Grigori Medvedev – translated from Russian – Medvedev, a nuclear engineer in the former Soviet Union, fought government censors (mostly in vain), to publish articles about official cover-ups of nuclear accidents and radioactive contamination. He describes his battle against Kremlin officials who were keeping the public ignorant by banning words like "safety" and "protection" in a stinging indictment of the secrecy, corruption, and incompetence that led to the Chernobyl meltdown.

***Share something about yourself that you believe is misunderstood by others***.

People assume that I am tech-savvy. I am not. I don't do social media. I am probably the last person on earth to have learned PowerPoint. I still have my Kodak carousel projector and all my slides. Oh, and I also still have my trusty IBM Selectric typewriter!

***Editor's note.***
Dr. Sleet joined the Academy on March 15, 1998 as the 18th Charter member. He was selected as one of the early Fellows of the Academy in the class of 1999.

**Elbert D. Glover and Robert J. McDermott are the Feature Editors of *Sapere Aude*.**