

Fighting for the Well-Being of Children



A new master's program at OU-Tulsa is designed to help children rise above obstacles of trauma, poverty and food insecurity.

BY GINNIE GRAHAM
PHOTOS BY JACOBI CAMPBELL

Shades of the war-hardened soldier might show a bit as Jay Silk argues the finer points of the Indian Child Welfare Act. But, as a social worker shooting hoops with students after school, he's more of a big kid.

"There are two aspects of me," Silk says. "I was a warrior in gun fights and in war. That's the tough, rough side of me. Digging deep down—after going to counseling where I still go to figure out how to be better and the best I can be—I'm also more sensitive and understanding.

"These are my two different things: I've been to war, and I love working with kids."

That passion for youth is what brought Silk into the first class of a master's degree program in Childhood Well-Being at the OU-Tulsa campus. Silk isn't pursuing this

◀ Jay Silk, a former U.S. Navy gunner's mate turned social worker for the Cherokee Nation, is using experiences and knowledge earned from OU's Childhood Well-Being program to help at-risk kids.

degree to advance his career or boost a resumé.

“This is for me and the kids I’m helping,” Silk says.

Silk’s degree program is a mix of in-person and online classes that began in summer 2021, with his graduation set for spring 2023.

“Our first cohort is a wonderfully diverse group of students working in many areas of education,” says Vickie E. Lake, professor and associate dean at the OU-Tulsa Jeannine Rainbolt College of Education. “They have taken the cohort model to heart. They look out for each other, have a text group where they share information and make sure everyone is in the loop, and have demonstrated good teamwork.”

The program grew from feedback among graduate students that they need courses to understand the broader context of communities.

Historically, teachers sought graduate degrees in their fields, such as masters’ degrees in early childhood education or administration. Today, educators are facing more challenges tied to societal issues, she says.

Teachers are looking for research and techniques around areas of trauma, food insecurity, abuse, lack of health care, family dynamics, poverty and other cultural obstacles.

“These social issues show up in children’s behavior, academic ability and parental support, to name a few,” Lake says. “On top of these issues, educators are now dealing with the ramifications of COVID-19 and kids not being in school for close to two years.

“All teachers know that they do more than teach. They are mothers, fathers, social workers, therapists, nurses, counselors, coaches and cheerleaders.

“This program provides knowledge and skills that support many of these areas that will increase a teacher’s ability to work effectively with children and families,” she says, adding, “My use of the word ‘children’ applies to anyone in school. This



“I’ve been to war, and I love working with kids,” says Silk, who serves as a role model to tribal youth. His OU-Tulsa coursework has helped him understand students’ perspectives and trauma.

program is not just for teachers of young children.”

The 36-hour, non-thesis program took about two years to establish and is in the Department of Instructional Leadership and Academic Curriculum at OU-Tulsa. The program was designed to bring in views from other areas of study such as social work, urban design, public administration, education and allied health.

“The goal of the program is to provide a platform for a multidisciplinary view of holistic child well-being,” Lake says.

This all-encompassing approach also attracts graduates from other professions, like Silk, who has a degree in psychology and is a member of the Cherokee Nation, working in its youth services division.

“Times are changing for these kids,” Silk says. “So many kids, especially at-risk Native youth, have so much trauma in their lives. This program has shown me to think outside the box a little more and not be so quick to jump to a conclusion.

I'm more patient now. We talk about different types of trauma in class. It helps you understand where these kids are coming from."

Growing up, Silk split his time between his parents, who lived in Edmond and Sallisaw. He was aimless after high school graduation in 1992, bouncing between jobs.

In 1994, Silk joined the U.S. Navy and was sent to the Middle East to protect shipping and boating routes. While a Petty Officer Second Class, he worked as a gunner's mate to ensure the operation of the ship's weapons systems. He served for six years.

Silk remained active in the U.S. Navy Reserve for four more years while also attending the University of Central Oklahoma for a psychology degree. In 2001, a series of events threw him into a tailspin. That included the motorcycle death of a close friend, the Sept. 11 attacks and birth of his son, Kaleb, who he has raised as a single parent.

"I didn't know how to handle it all and had no direction," he says. "I dropped out and was working job-to-job and raising my son."

Those jobs were in education and included becoming the academic and attendance dean at the for-profit Wright Business School and director of career services at another for-profit school. He then joined the Oklahoma National Guard in 2010 and deployed to Afghanistan in 2012 with the 45th Infantry Brigade Combat Team.

After a year, he was injured by a homemade explosive device while riding in a vehicle. The incident sent three soldiers home with injuries. Silk sustained extensive nerve damage and injuries to his neck and back. Plus, he developed post-traumatic stress disorder and "all the stuff that comes with war," he says.

Silk stayed overseas but wasn't allowed on missions, hoping to improve enough to help with training. His injuries did not heal to that point, and he returned home in 2012 and retired from military service in 2015.

Shortly after arriving home, his mother died, followed by the deaths of a grandmother and aunt. He and his son moved to Cookson in northeastern Oklahoma to live with his father. It was then he finished his bachelor's degree in general education.

"I was reconnecting with my son and hanging out with my dad. It was a somber time," Silk says. "I wanted to be a better role model, and I always wanted to work for the Cherokee Nation. That's why I wanted a degree in psychology—to come back and help the future of my tribe."

He was hired as a court representative in the Cherokee Nation Indian Child Welfare division. He attended family court hearings across the country when Cherokee Nation

children or families were involved. His job was to ensure that their rights under the federal Indian Child Welfare Act were upheld.

"I loved it," he says. "It's amazing that even in Oklahoma, with as big as the Native community is, many people didn't know about ICWA and what it means. It was about educating people and making sure families received the services they needed and deserved. Too often, they were given a plan but no services to get there. It was setting them up for failure."

Silk saw some tragic situations. He saw parents struggle against mental health and addiction problems. He saw their frustration with and distrust in government systems. He saw trauma play out across generations.

He also witnessed the rights of Indigenous people being violated, typically in child placements and lack of access to services.

"Some of these attorneys fight so hard to say, 'This person doesn't practice their Native tradition.' That's a poor excuse," Silk says. "I come back to argue that it's 400 years of forced assimilation. This person is connected to their tribe; this person is a tribal member. Regardless of what you say, they have these rights. Success for families really depends on how much their social worker can do for them."

After six years, Silk took a position in the Cherokee Nation's Youth Services & Special Projects department. He works with Cherokee youth at risk of dropping out or getting in trouble.


"I try to make it entertaining to just hang out and have fun," he says. "They've been in school all day and don't want to go to another class."

But, he sneaks in advice. Right now, many are engaged in vaping and using marijuana, often taken from parents who legally obtained it from dispensaries.

"I don't lecture or say whether they should or should not do something," he says. "I give them information to explain the effects and what can happen, both to their health and legally. I just inform them."

"We aren't there to be a counselor. We talk to them, get down on their level and keep it real. We want to show them there is more out there. Some are out of touch with their culture. We are there to bring that to them—to learn about their history and culture."

"I love continuing my education," says Silk, who is now considering a doctorate degree.

"My passion for education has been reignited by taking this master's course. I'm thinking, 'What can I do after this to help my tribe?' I want to stay working with youth, just to interact with kids and be a role model." 

Ginnie Graham is a writer and editor for the Tulsa World.