In my final NASW News column, I wrote: "The presidency of NASW has been the most exciting and challenging experience of my professional career to date. It will shape the rest of my career in ways I can only imagine now." Looking back, I was right. My time as president shaped my teaching, my research, and my understanding of the profession. It has been 24 years since my term ended. Some of what is included here is etched firmly and clearly in my memory bank. Other facts were reclaimed by reviewing my NASW News columns and the Proceedings of the 1979 Delegate Assembly.

The 1979 Delegate Assembly adopted a new Code of Ethics that represented the profession's first serious and comprehensive revision of this document since the original was developed at the founding of the Association. The Code received high praise throughout the profession as well as by outside groups who study ethical codes. This updated version of the NASW Code of Ethics was the first to officially articulate the prohibition against sexual or personal relationships between social workers and clients/former clients. It is my understanding that we were the first human-service profession to tackle this issue.

We also adopted a new process for establishing the Association's program priorities and set the first goals at the 1979 Delegate Assembly. The program goal setting process resulted from several years of work involving the National Board of Directors and NASW staff, chapters, and members. This process made it possible to set priorities for using Association resources, both people and money, in areas deemed most important by the Delegate Assembly and Board of Directors; additionally, this made prioritizing the many public policy issues that the Association was concerned about more feasible.

One issue I looked forward to working on during my term as president was the conceptualization of the profession's practice specialization. I entered the presidency under the notion that an orderly conceptualization was possible and desirable; however, I left the presidency convinced that a messy organization of our practice was not only inevitable but contributed to the profession's flexibility and innovation as new practice settings opened and new modalities were developed. Despite this reversal of my position—and I think my views on the matter very much paralleled those of the Association—important work was accomplished in sorting out practice specializations and giving members opportunities to interact with others with similar practice interests.

As only the second woman elected to the presidency in the history of the Association, I took a serious interest in issues involving women's role in NASW and in the profession. My appointment of Anne Minahan, MSW as editor of Social Work made her, at that time, the only woman ever to edit the journal. Minahan was part of a growing group of practice scholars who challenged the orthodoxy of previous paradigms with innovative approaches to practice.
The first national women’s conference was held during my term, bringing together women leaders, scholars, and service providers from all over the country. Issues were debated, research was reported, and innovative programs were discussed. Given the strength of the national women’s movement and the numerical dominance of women in social work, it was a landmark event that signaled the profession’s effort to become more closely aligned with, and assume a leadership role in, the women’s movement.

Another NASW accomplishment during my term was the significant change in the Association’s affirmative action goals. The Affirmative Action Plan was made permanent, and the goal for women in leadership positions was increased from 50 percent to proportional membership representation. This change made it possible for many women—both younger and older—to achieve leadership positions, which has changed the face of the Association.

Acting on behalf of the profession, Political Action for Candidate Election (PACE) endorsed President Carter for re-election, resulting in an Oval Office meeting between President Carter, NASW Executive Director Chauncey Alexander, and me. NASW was also invited to participate in meetings with key domestic policy advisors. This endorsement reflected the Association’s new political sophistication and power. Unfortunately, our access to the Oval Office was relatively short-lived.

The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 signaled a breakup of the old New Deal Democratic Coalition; the Coalition had fostered the development of Civil Rights legislation, public social services, and the War on Poverty, and supported the idea that government had a responsibility to help those in need. The 1980 White House Conference on Families was a prelude to the shift in the public policy agenda. Conservative forces seized many of the local, state, and regional planning processes for the purpose of advancing a "pro-family agenda," which largely conflicted with the values and policies of social work.

At the same time there were significant losses in public funding for social service programs. Proposition 13 in California placed an absolute limit on the rate at which local real estate taxes could be assessed. This was the first of a landslide of local, state, and federal legislation that dramatically reduced public tax revenues available to support a variety of programs; and, with greater competition for dwindling tax dollars, social service programs suffered severe losses.

This was also a time when credentials and professionals were suspect. It was the beginning of preference for self help rather than professional help—ideas congruent with the Reagan Administration’s positions. At one point during my term, three child welfare workers in Texas (one supervisor and two case-carrying staff) were arrested and held criminally culpable in the death of a child on a protective service caseload. Eventually they were acquitted, but the message was clear, generating considerable fear among social workers.

My appointment, by President Carter, to the National Advisory Committee on Women’s Issues was the highest governmental position I held. It was also an important advancement for the profession, as I was the only social worker on the Committee and could represent social work to a group of powerful women and the Administration. I co-authored the Human Services chapter for the Committee’s final report, Voices for Women. Unfortunately, with Reagan’s election, the Committee was disbanded, and the report shelved. I recently reread it and was surprised by how well the recommendations held up: they are still relevant today.