

REMEMBERING DR. BRUCE R. BAKER

In Memoriam

The international AAC community is mourning the loss of Bruce R. Baker, AM, LHD. He passed away on May 7, 2020, in Pittsburgh, PA, USA, at the age of 77. Details about his life and legacy can be found in [his published obituary](#). ISAAC previously posted a press release [here](#) on our website.

On behalf of the ISAAC Executive Board past and present, and the ISAAC Council and staff, we express our sincere condolences to Dr. Baker's family, colleagues, and many good friends around the world.

Tributes and condolences have been pouring in. They are a testament to Dr. Baker's brilliance, generosity, and passion for the field of AAC.



Over the years, Bruce became much more than a business partner. He became a mentor to many, a teacher to others, and an inspiration to us all. Bruce has touched so many of us in the AAC community and will be greatly missed.

– *Dave Hershberger, CEO, PRC-Salttillo, USA*

For decades Bruce Baker brought the linguistic perspective to the multi-disciplinary field of AAC. He founded successful companies that provide AAC and has participated in many ISAAC conferences. He has always been a key supporter of ISAAC. We mourn the loss of an AAC veteran and a friend.

– *Gregor Renner, former ISAAC President, Germany*

We all have different memories of Bruce. I remember him most for his generosity and hospitality. Bruce was also very willing to share his knowledge and travelled the world doing presentations, mostly at his own expense.

I remember in 2000 when the Washington ISAAC Conference was close to the Pittsburgh Employment Conference (PEC). Bruce cancelled PEC and supported many people who use AAC to attend the ISAAC conference. In 2009 I was able to attend PEC and experienced Bruce's hospitality when we all gathered outside the Semantic company building to enjoy an evening meal and entertainment. It was raining but it didn't matter; we were enjoying sitting around, relaxing, and talking to each other.

Bruce would often post on Facebook the communal singing evenings he had in his home.

That is how I see Bruce now: enjoying the fellowship of others.

– *Meredith Allan, ISAAC President, Australia*

Bruce Baker was a giant in the field of AAC. Unique, smart, committed to making a difference ... a visionary. Bruce Baker changed the lives of many. Together, let us celebrate his life.

– *Sarah Blackstone, Past-President, US Society for AAC (USSAAC)*

As a linguist and innovator, Bruce's development of Minspeak changed the field of AAC. As a gifted teacher, he generously taught us from his wealth of knowledge and insight. Together, we honour him by continuing to innovate, teach, and change the world.

– *Gail Van Tatenhove, AAC Specialist, USA*

Enhancing our AAC World

In addition to workshops and seminars, I consider myself so lucky to have spent days in Bruce's "villa" (a house close to his), where Bob Conti made our stay so informal and fun. I can clearly remember Bruce showing me around his living room and telling me a variety of stories, engaging in a pleasant chat. His simplicity and humbleness impressed me, as I was only an occupational therapist volunteering at the ISAAC 2012 AAC Camp. I always admired his dedication to use his brains and time towards enhancing our AAC world, especially coming from a non-traditional area of practice. Bruce's passage through this world changed and inspired so many people. Thank you, Bruce Baker!

– *Nadia Browning, ISAAC Council Chair, Canada/Brazil*



Dr. Bruce Baker was a mensch. A multi-faceted man with a sharp intellect and if possible, even sharper sense of humour. He was passionate about his work, but even more passionate about people. He enjoyed travelling and exploring new places, but enjoyed it even more if he could learn about the culture, customs and languages in these places.

The AAC field in South Africa was enriched when he visited us in 2004 but, in true Bruce Baker style, he left a legacy in the form of the "Semantic Compaction Award" at the University of Pretoria. This award is made annually for the best research project amongst the Master's and Doctoral students of the Centre for AAC. It has enabled us to support excellent students who have made a contribution nationally and internationally to the field of AAC. It was awarded for the first time in 2004 to two

Master's students who shared the award (Magdel Basson and Marina Herold), both of whom continued their studies and obtained PhDs!

All of the recipients of this award have published their research, mostly in international journals, and presented their research at various conferences, amongst others, the biennial ISAAC conference. They have been involved in clinical and/or advocacy work to improve the lives of people with severe communication difficulties in South Africa and internationally. This would not have been possible without the generosity and commitment of Bruce Baker!

Indeed, Dr Bruce Baker was a true mensch: someone to admire and emulate. Someone who shared ideas and information that was enriching to all. Someone of noble character. Someone who was happy for others and made people feel better about themselves. The AAC community in South Africa treasures his legacy!

– *Juan Bornman, South Africa (ISAAC President-Elect)*

Commenting on how "put together"/well dressed SLPs are (or at least were – back 20 years ago!), Bruce wisecracked that "CCC" stands for "Certainly Chic-ly Clothed". We'll miss you, Bruce.

– *Amy S. Goldman, President-Elect, US Society for AAC (USSAAC)*

He Made the World a Better Place

I first met Bruce Baker in Vancouver in 1987 when I was a new clinician. As a linguist I was impressed with Bruce's clear vision that language tools for people who use AAC had to be generative, and had to provide individuals who were not competently literate with the means to generate and express novel thoughts. In the 1980s these were new, ground-breaking ideas. After decades of practice in the field of AAC, I can attest that Bruce's ideas and work made a tangible and life-changing difference for many individuals with developmental disabilities, providing the basis for autonomy and growth in their lives. Through the decades I had the good fortune of spending time with Bruce over dinners, drinks, and walking about at a variety of ISAAC and other AAC-related events in many parts of the world. He was a man with a wide range of interests and we always had lively conversations on art, history, politics, and of course language. I know there are thousands of people around the world who benefited from Bruce's ideas, his mentorship, his generosity, and his care for his fellow human beings. He made the world a better place for so many people.

– Jeff Riley, Former ISAAC President, Canada

Bruce Baker is an icon in the field of AAC. The Minspeak system he developed was ground-breaking in supporting communication for people who have significant difficulties in speaking. He will be sorely missed.

– Erna Alant, former ISAAC President, USA/South Africa

In the beginning it wasn't easy for Bruce to be Bruce. It was the early 1980s. He was a genius and he had the most interesting and engaging presentation style. He was quirky and funny but 100% comfortable in his own skin. He was an unforgettable person. If you had the opportunity to meet him even once you would never forget him. Bruce invented a language system (Minspeak) that to this day is the most widely used system in the field. He helped us all see the power and the beauty of what he created.

We can recognize Dr. Bruce Baker as a truly gifted contributor in our field by these traits: brilliance, passion, determination, compassion, generosity, and the ability to make you feel like you are the most interesting person he has ever met. I loved watching him with individuals who used Augmentative Communication, with complete understanding and acceptance. He empowered them with language, which helped them evolve into the fullness of who they were.

The remarkable accomplishments in Dr. Bruce Baker's life are too numerous to mention. My fondest memory was, interestingly enough, the last time I spent time with him in 2012 at the AAC Language Seminar Series he held in his home town in Pittsburgh. There he would gather a group of motivated learners and invite guest speakers to present on topics related to Minspeak (Unity). Bruce would house the attendees in one of his several homes in the Pittsburgh suburb he lived in. Many would visit with him in his home each evening to eat, play music, sing, and of course talk. His warmth and hospitality were incredible. For the duration of the conference he kept everyone fed, housed, and filled their minds with knowledge. Bruce had a very tight inner circle of trusted friends and colleagues who cared deeply for him. He was an icon, loved and revered by all who had the opportunity to meet him. The brilliant man who created a way of representing language through icons was in fact an icon himself.

With all my love and respect, Bruce, for your enormous contribution to our field and for all you have done for the many people I know who have benefited from your invention.

– Marilynn J. Buzolich Ph.D., CCC-SLP, ACTS Founder/Director, San Francisco, CA, USA

A Heart of Gold

Bruce was one of a kind. He had a heart of gold, and he would do anything for you once he knew you needed something. It was in 2007 that I decided to invest more of my interest in AAC. I have been a long-time user, and I was frustrated by where AAC was headed. A speech language pathologist friend suggested I attend PEC. So, I registered for it, and talked to Bruce and Bob a couple of times over email and the phone. We weren't able to make the Friday session because we were tied up, but on Saturday morning this strange little old man came up to me and asked me are you Chris Klein, and then walked away. For those of us that know Bruce well, not introducing himself was one of his things he would do. So, Lindsey, my personal aide, and I were laughing about him all through Saturday. He would come ask me two or three questions about communication, and walk away. By Saturday night, I was being introduced to his friends, and yet we still had no idea who he was.

Our conversations continued throughout the year via email and phone calls. He desired to bring me back to his office sometime to chat more and just get me more involved with PEC and SHOUT. That November of 2007 I took a bad fall out of my wheelchair and I had a brain bleed. I was taken to my parents to recover and somehow Bruce found their number and called my parents. He told my mom to take good care of me because I had special gifts. This is what Bruce did, he saw the abilities in somebody before the disability. Again, this is a person I hardly knew, and here he was calling regularly to check on me. It was in July of 2008 that I finally made it to their office, and finally got to know who Bruce was. He was a brilliant man that came up with a language system that was in line with what I believed worked with AAC. Our friendship grew fast from there. However, if Bruce just saw my disability, he wouldn't have taken the time to get to know me. He wouldn't have saw the gifts I had. That is the thing that made Bruce so special. He saw value in everybody.

In those first few years, I frequently stayed at his house while I was in Pittsburgh working on whatever he needed me to do. I feel sometimes it was just to have fun. It was always fun to hear him come



downstairs at 1 a.m. because Seinfeld was on. "Hey guys, are you awake? Come watch Seinfeld with me." We would always watch Seinfeld with him. He loved our discussions together. We may not always agree on everything, but he was always willing to listen. He was always willing to teach you something about anything.



Those discussions would last long into the night, and pickup again whenever we were together. I know I have missed those awhile, but we still had those once in awhile. I am going to miss arguing with him, even when I knew I wasn't going to win. Most of all, I am going to miss my friend! The mission will march forward!

– *Chris Klein, USA*

In high school, the principal didn't believe that Minspeak was a language. So, Bruce wrote the principal and convinced her that I was using a language. I will never forget that. Thank you.

– *Ana Celia Berlowitz, USA*

Greatly Missed & Fondly Remembered

Bruce Baker was a charming and erudite linguist. He was also an original thinker who made an enormous contribution to the communication of people with little or no functional speech.

In 1979-80 I met Bruce through the pages of *Communication Outlook*, where he described the basic concepts of Minspeak. It was obviously going to be a game-changer!

Prior to this, literate people who needed to use communication aids were restricted to spelling, either on ordinary typewriters or on alphabet boards, very slowly. People who weren't literate and needed communication aids were given very limited pictorial displays.

Speech synthesis was in its infancy and almost the only internationally available easily portable electronic communication aid was the Canon Communicator, a miniature typewriter with paper tape output that required literacy and good finger skills.

Bruce recognized the two major problems of the currently available communication options. Spelling everything was extremely slow and single-meaning pictures locked the user into a very limited vocabulary. Minspeak addressed both issues. It was like a new language, or a new operating system, that had to be learnt, but allowed both spellers and non-spellers to generate a language – initially English – with increased speed and flexibility.

Fortunately, the technology required for Minspeak users to be able to speak and generate written documents – if necessary, without using their hands – was being developed around the same time, but the prototypes were expensive and it took years for them to become readily available.

When we eventually met in person, Bruce was amused to hear that I had tried to make a low-tech version of Minspeak in 1980. If I hadn't given it up as impractical it probably would have looked like the PODD books we are all familiar with today.

Two stories illustrate the achievements made possible by Minspeak and the associated technology.

In the 1980s and early '90s Bob Williams, an AAC user, gave presentations by pointing to the alphabet surrounded by useful words and phrases on a large board, with which he managed to generate about 30 words a minute. That was a good spelling speed, but much slower than ordinary speakers who can say 120+ words a minute. For Bob to speak at all required the assistance of a skilled communication partner, who said the letters and words that he selected and repeated the entire sentence when he hit a period.



The photo shows Bob, who'd held a senior position under the Clinton administration, at a meeting in the White House. Obviously, Bob has made a joke, as President Obama is laughing at the other end of the table.

The second story shows me making a complete fool of myself. At the 1994 ISAAC conference I delivered a paper on the importance of literacy for people with little or no speech. It said that you couldn't use the words that you wanted, or say whatever you wanted, unless you could spell.

Greatly Missed & Fondly Remembered - *continued*

The session was chaired very competently by an AAC user who could not use his hands. He took issue with the paper, and said literacy wasn't essential.

"But you wouldn't be able to say that, or communicate so fluently, if you weren't literate."
"I'm not – I'm dyslexic. I'm using Minspeak."

Both achievements were made possible by Bruce Baker and his colleagues at Liberator/PRC.

Later Bruce started coming to Australia regularly to give workshops and we had the pleasure of being able to catch up with him for meals and gallery visits. He was always interested in anything new, such as Australian indigenous art, and he was a delightful guest.

Bruce was advocating for AAC users on YouTube just a few days before he died. He will be greatly missed but his contribution to AAC will never be forgotten.

– *Rosemary Crossley, Anne McDonald Centre Inc., Australia*

I was very sad to hear of the death of Professor Bruce Baker – a great loss not only to the field of AAC but to the many, from all walks of life, who knew Bruce and benefited from his kindness. Bruce was a big influence on my early research, including my doctoral topic. How we laughed about the colourful core vocabulary of Australian conversations at work! I was lucky enough to visit the Rolling Rock community many times, often with my students, and visiting the Greenhouses in Pittsburgh, the Andy Warhol Museum, and the Smithsonian with Bruce are just some of the additional treats that always seemed to be in store and were so much more interesting with Bruce as a guide. Bruce had an extraordinary mind and a knowledge that spanned just about any topic – his interests seemed limitless but within AAC, it is for Minspeak, linguistics, and the Pittsburgh Employment conference that he is perhaps best known. His contribution to AAC has been huge and he changed the lives of countless people, including both people who use AAC and practitioners over many decades. All those whose lives he touched were enriched – I will think of him whenever I see Seinfeld and, along with the ISAAC family, feel privileged to have known him and spent time with him. Vale Bruce



– *Susan Balandin, Deakin University, Australia*

AGOSCI Australia would like to pass on our condolences to Bruce's family, colleagues, and friends, as we remember a person who changed our lives. Bruce came to Australia a few times for AGOSCI conferences and teaching tours, and many of us were able to meet him. Bruce Baker was an early pioneer of efficient generative vocabulary for those who use AAC to communicate, and many of us learnt our basic frameworks from him. He was able to articulate, with clarity and colour, about AAC design. His words and vision helped us to be better therapists as we planned AAC assessment and implementation with clients and the AAC team. His Minspeak system of accessing language is used widely across Australia. An Australian who has used Unity as his symbolic language since his teenage years said, "That man changed my life. That man made me who I am today"

Vale Bruce Baker, will be missed, but remembered forever.

– *Darren Trentepohl, Chairperson, AGOSCI Australia*

Helping People Raise their Voices

What a great and fantastic man! The AAC community is blessed by him. Since 2000, Stefanie Sachse and I had a couple of important conversations with Bruce at AAC conferences, on our AAC Research and Consultation Center in Cologne (Germany), and in former times, from 2000 to 2007, at the University of Halle-Wittenberg in Halle/Saale (Germany). He has had an important impact on our work. We learned so much from Bruce and his linguistic view. We have done research on core vocabulary since 2004 and all of our Cologne Communication Boards and Binders and our core vocab concept in AAC and in German as a Second Language for refugees is based on conversations with Bruce in the early 2000s.

Here are some photos from his visits and presentations in Germany:



Paul Andres and Bruce, during a presentation at our AAC Centre opening in Cologne, Germany 2008



Bruce, Maren, and Steffi, in the year 2000 in front of the of the original Reformation Church in Wittenberg



Bruce, Stefanie Sachse and Jens Boenisch in UNESCO Wörlitzer Park (close to Wittenberg) in the year 2000

– *Jens Boenisch, AAC Research and Consultation Center at the University of Cologne, Germany*

Bruce Baker has been an inspiration for our work and our team at the University of Cologne in Germany. Bruce was a speaker at the launching of the AAC research and consultation center in 2008. Jens Boenisch had invited Bruce, Susan Balandin, and Gail van Tatenhove for this special occasion and we learned so much from these presentations and conversations. Bruce has been a great teacher sharing his tremendous knowledge with us, with the teachers and the university students and it was impressive for us to see the dedication he's shown helping people to raise their voices.

Some years earlier Jens Boenisch, Paul Andres, Christof Bünk, Nina Hömberg, Susan Balandin, and I had the amazing opportunity to participate at the PEC – a lifechanging conference for me personally, being able to experience first-hand what life can look like for adult AAC users that were in charge of their lives – because they had the communication skills, the devices, the support from people like Bruce.

We say thank you, Bruce, for a sightseeing tour at night through Pittsburgh, for that conference and the town meeting in particular, for many conversations and insights throughout the years, for a device that helped my sister say what she wanted.

– *Stefanie K. Sachse, on behalf of the team at the AAC Research and Consultation Center at the University of Cologne, Germany*

A Transformative Role in AAC

Bruce played a unique role in AAC. His insights, as he introduced Minspeak® and Words Strategy within our evolving field, made a major contribution to AAC. Equally transformative were Bruce’s semantic compaction principles as they enriched the lives of AAC users. Bruce and I travelled different terrains within AAC, but I will always treasure the many times in which our paths connected. Bruce was a very bright, generous, and caring individual. We were most fortunate to have had him amongst us in the AAC community.

– Shirley McNaughton, *Blissymbolics Communication Institute, Canada*

Dr. Bruce Baker was one of my first AAC mentors when I started this great career back in the early 1980s. Bruce was an intermittent but welcomed instructor extraordinaire at my first clinical placement, called the Syracuse Developmental Center. At the time, the SDC was one of 10 sites nationwide at the forefront of AAC assessment and intervention and Bruce was there, teaching clinicians the theory of semantic compaction and the application of “minimal effort speech” or Minspeak. I learned so much by watching Bruce work with clients when they were trying out these new “high tech voiced output devices.”

Bruce had this unique mix of quirky personality, quick wit, and engaging intelligence that made learning from him a true experience. One of my first memories of Bruce was when he placed a large stack of sheets on a table in front of me, each sheet a mimeographed colour copy of 128 icons, then asking me, very politely, if I could cut out those 128 Minsymbols and combine them (glue them, not cut/paste on a computer) to make as many sentences as possible, of varying length, and for different purposes. Then I was to count the words/symbols that were used most frequently across the different sentences. The most fun was when Bruce suggested to my direct supervisor that I could use the new PRC device called the TouchTalker to teach my new clients how to combine just a few icons to say many things. Ahhh, the early days of core vocabulary I was thrilled to be asked to do any task for Bruce, and my two other early mentors at SDC, Carol Cohen and Judith Frumkin. In fact, the three of them allowed me to join them on a panel presentation at my first ASHA back in 1985. Thirty-six years later, I remain appreciative of Bruce’s foresight and dedication to excellence. He will be sorely missed by many.

– Lisa Erwin-Davidson, *Ph.D., CCC-SLP, California State University Fullerton, USA*

Condolences to Bruce Baker's family. We will miss him.

– Aurelia Rivarola, *Italy*

I'm sorry for this terrible news, prayers for family!

– Priscila Teresa Rodriguez Cota, *Mexico*

Dear Bruce,

You left us! The whole world of AAC is in mourning.

Thank you, Bruce, for all that you brought to AAC thanks to “MINSPEAK and the POLYSEMIE.”

We extend our heartfelt condolences to your family, friends, and all whose lives you touched!

Friendly and sincere regards,

Anne Courtejoie, *Directrice*

Comalso (*Communication Alternative Solution*)

Belgium



Bruce Baker in Belgium,
May 5, 2014



“Some candles
never go out”

DR. BRUCE R. BAKER

Kia hōhonu ai te puna kupu

Let the pool of words be deep



Bruce Baker, with Chris Bugaj and Ann Smail, NZ

We had the privilege of Bruce visiting Aotearoa, New Zealand on a number of occasions dating back to the early 1990s, the latest time in 2015. As the national provider of communication assistive technology in New Zealand for almost 30 years, the TalkLink Trust has always used Minspeak as one of our go-to tools. It is always inspiring when new speech-language therapists working at TalkLink suddenly figure out the power of Minspeak, and have that “aha” moment!

Having been involved in the AAC field for 30 odd years, I am still in awe of how this tool was originally developed and has continued to evolve over time. It has truly stood the test of time, and with the development of technology supporting the principles, Bruce's legacy will live on and continue to give people a voice.

Mke Ninces, aka The Minspeaker, a TalkLink ambassador and recipient of the 2018 ISAAC Outstanding Consumer Lecture award, sums up Bruce's contribution in this powerful video far better than any of us can; as Mke says, “it has allowed me to have the courage to speak up and the freedom to express my own creative thinking”. View Mke's video [here](#).

- Anne Smail and Mke Ninces, New Zealand

As a relatively novice speech language therapist/pathologist, I had the privilege of attending a day-long workshop presented by Bruce in Edinburgh (Scotland) in the late 1980s. He spoke eloquently and academically about the theory behind “minimum effort speech.” In fact, he was effervescent! I was a convert to the Minspeak principles and its usefulness to people who might benefit from it. He was a true inspiration in terms of encouraging us all to think outside of the box. Bruce, you will be sadly missed and fondly remembered.

- Janice Murray, former ISAAC Council Chair, UK

Thank you to all contributors

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