

Tribute to Dr. Sam Corrigan

Dr. Sam Corrigan: A Personal Remembrance

To say I have many fond memories of Sam Corrigan would be a gross understatement. At a pivotal moment in my life when I was in my late twenties, Sam Corrigan introduced me to the worlds of Aboriginal culture and academia and changed the course of my life forever. More than three and a half decades later—much of it spent in service to the academy—I am still indebted to Sam for his friendship, guidance and generosity. More than anyone else, Sam nurtured my incipient interest in Aboriginal arts, encouraged my fledgling intellectual curiosity, and allowed me the freedom to express my research findings in creative and sometimes unorthodox ways. For that I will be eternally grateful. As a (then) recent art college graduate, and even more recent refugee from the Toronto folk music scene, I was initially unsure of my scholastic abilities when entering Brandon University in the fall of 1973. Sam helped me to find a sure footing, building on my past experience as a graphic designer and songwriter, to explore the fields of First Nations arts and literature. It was an exhilarating process. Today, I try to cultivate a similar spirit of academic adventure in my own students, where a quest for knowledge can spill over with excitement and possibility. Sam taught me that. More precisely, Sam taught me to respect that. Respect is the one quality I most associate with Sam Corrigan. Sam had an abiding respect for Aboriginal peoples and indigenous knowledge, and an equally deep respect for the relationship between teacher and student, between mentor and novice. Such respect was frequently reflected in extraordinary acts of kindness. For example, when I received my undergraduate degree from Brandon University in 1975, Sam invited my wife and I out for a celebratory dinner. There, he presented my wife with a red rose, and me with a red leather bound copy of a rare 1922 monograph on the Copper Eskimos, with my name stamped in gold leaf on the front cover. It was an exquisite gift – of faith, friendship and possibility. It remains a treasured possession to this day. On the inside front cover he wrote, “For Allan Ryan – at the start of something new.” And so it was.

With Sam’s encouragement, along with that of other Brandon faculty, I soon after began graduate studies at the University of Arizona. Not without a little trepidation. Yet, even before my MA was conferred Sam asked me to consider constructing and teaching a course on First

Nations art for the Department of Native Studies at Brandon once I returned to Canada. His faith in me was unflinching. And so began my university teaching career, in the summer of 1978, with a three week survey of Native arts offered on campus in Brandon, followed by a second stint in the remote Native community of Norway House in northern Manitoba. It was definitely an instance of mutual learning. Over the next few years, with Sam's continual guidance and feedback, I expanded my teaching repertoire beyond the visual arts to include Introduction to Native Studies, Oral Narratives and Aboriginal Peoples on Film. Thus equipped, I regularly travelled back to Brandon and many northern Native communities from my home in Toronto, in service to the Department of Native Studies. It was during this period that Sam encouraged me to write book reviews for his newly minted *Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, with the promise of free books for my library. It was also during this time that my two sons, Noka and D'Arcy were born. To mark these occasions Sam gifted us with beautiful quilted star blankets made by local Native craftswomen. These too are now treasured possessions, and already family heirlooms.

Sam never ceased to seek out a full time position for me at Brandon, but in the end it proved too elusive. We came close once when I was offered a one year term contract by Inter-Universities North, headquartered in Thompson, Manitoba, to teach a slate of Brandon University's Native Studies courses in a number of northern communities. While this required relocating from Toronto to Thompson, the promise of several years work seemed worth the move. Unfortunately, that promise proved elusive as well. It was a disappointment that Sam took personally, and one which (I think) was only fully relieved when I asked him to write me yet another reference letter, for funding to enter the PhD program in Anthropology at the University of British Columbia. This time I received an entry scholarship from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), which was subsequently renewed. I have Sam to thank for the number of teaching positions and courses taught that I was able to list on my application letter.

In 1995 I received my PhD from UBC. In 1999 UBC Press and the University of Washington Press published my PhD dissertation as *The Trickster Shift: Humour and Irony in Contemporary Native Art*. As might be expected, Sam was especially pleased and bought copies to give as gifts to visiting speakers who came to Brandon. The book subsequently won an American Book Award in 2000 for its contribution to multicultural literature. That year, I once again asked Sam to write me a reference letter for a position posted at Carleton University. It was roughly twenty-five years since he'd written his first letter on my behalf. It must have

been a good letter—after all, he'd had a lot of time to refine it—because in December, 2000, I was offered the position of New Sun Chair in Aboriginal Art and Culture at Carleton University. It is a position I continue to hold. I now teach courses on Aboriginal Peoples in Canadian Studies, Art History and Film Studies and also host an annual interdisciplinary conference on Aboriginal arts.

It is no exaggeration to credit Sam Corrigan's commitment to Aboriginal peoples, his dedication to the discipline of Native Studies, his expansive pedagogical practice, and his generous spirit and friendship for the many bountiful gifts that have been bestowed on me and enriched my life in so many ways to these many years.

With great respect and gratitude,
Allan J. Ryan, PhD
New Sun Chair in Aboriginal Art and Culture
Carleton University

Memories of Sam Corrigan

I'll leave Sam's many accomplishments and contributions to Brandon University and Native Studies for others to describe. Those are well known – his coming to Brandon University, originally joining the Department of Sociology in September 1970, his creation of the course Contemporary Native Peoples in Canada, which was the first step in creating the Department of Native Studies, which opened in September of 1975, his founding of the *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* in 1981.

What I want to talk about is what I remember Sam best for: as a teacher, a mentor, and a friend. I first met Sam several years before he came to Brandon University, when I was an undergraduate at the University of Manitoba. It was the summer of 1966, and I was taking a course in cultural anthropology at the University of Manitoba. At that time, the anthropology department at U of M was small—3 people—smaller, I now realize, than the anthropology department here at Brandon. I liked anthropology; in fact, it was my favorite subject, but I wasn't seriously considering following it as a career... until I signed up for that summer course.

I knew all the regular members of the anthropology department, so I was surprised, on that first day of class, to see a complete stranger walk into the classroom and take his place at the front desk. Let me give you my first impressions of Sam – they may surprise you, and they may

be very different from those of you who've only known him at Brandon University. First of all, this clean-shaven, well-dressed (!) young guy (dressed in a style that I, as a young kid from the north end of Winnipeg would vaguely classify as "British") came striding in, wearing an expensive-looking sports shirt, slacks – and an ascot!! It's hard to look good in an ascot, but he pulled it off; all of us in the class thought he was one cool dude.

He started off by calmly announcing that we were not going to be learning about "cultural anthropology" in this course (contempt fairly dripping from his lips as he mentioned the word culture). No, we were going to be exposed to something called British social anthropology. I'd taken several anthro courses by this time, but that was the first I'd heard of the British school of anthropology, or even of the idea that there could be such a thing as a different school or way of looking at anthropology. He explained how the British approach dismissed the vague concept of culture, and concentrated instead on studying the much more visible and observable matter of social interaction. He explained that "social anthropology" was more like sociology, except that it worked with small-scale tribal and peasant societies, instead of contemporary large-scale societies. After about a week of classes, he had me totally convinced that social anthropology was the way to go! I, too, wanted to study social anthropology – way better than that American approach (although I could never totally give up all the other aspects of American anthropology that I loved: linguistics, archeology, biological anthro, especially human evolution). But by the end of the summer, I was convinced that all those guys – Evans-Pritchard, Radcliffe-Brown, Meyer Fortes, Edmund Leach – had the right idea.

Sam also told us about his own research for his PhD that he was doing right here in Manitoba with the Dakota (later he was to move the base for his fieldwork to Ft. Qu'Appelle, Saskatchewan) and he often illustrated points in his lectures using his own field experiences. One day around the middle of the course, he told us that our Monday class was cancelled, because he knew "he'd be too emotionally and physically drained" to conduct a class that day. "Why?" we wondered. Well, he was going to be attending the Sioux Valley powwow that weekend, and he knew he'd be in no shape to conduct a class on Monday. I had no idea why this would be so exhausting – especially emotionally. All I knew about powwows was the Banff "Indian Days" celebrations I had seen as a kid, and while those were mildly entertaining, I could hardly see them as anything that could be called exciting, let alone emotionally draining. He then casually invited any of us who were interested, and who could make their own way there, to join him on Saturday, and he'd

show us around.

I was determined to go. I had no car at the time, so I hitchhiked out to Sioux Valley. I think some other students might have showed up too, but I'm not sure. Anyway, I got there, and found Sam. He graciously took me under his wing, and we spent most of the weekend hanging out together.

The first thing we did, we jumped into his car and we drove over to meet a friend of his on another part of the reserve. We drove into the front yard of this house and an old gentleman—I can't remember his name—came out to greet us. Sam pulled out a bottle of “wine”—probably some kind of fortified brandy like Branvin or Four Aces—and handed it to the guy. The old man ripped off the cap, said something in Dakota, and poured a small amount on the ground. He took a drink and passed the bottle to me. I took a swig and passed the bottle to Sam. We stood there, talking, for a while, on this beautiful Saturday afternoon, in the bright prairie sunlight, a warm breeze slowly blowing by. Suddenly powwow music, drums, wafted over a low hill that was between us and the powwow campsite. The old gentleman remarked on that, and said he'd be showing up at the powwow later. We stood around talking for a few minutes more, and listening to the drums. It was just one of those perfect little moments that occur in our lives, that we're hardly conscious of at the time, but which we remember later as something special, that makes us glad to be alive.

As we jumped back into the car, I discovered that I had passed some kind of a test – although I hadn't been aware I was being tested. I hadn't wiped the mouth of the bottle when I took a drink! Apparently wiping off the mouth of the bottle would have been a severe breach of etiquette. From that point on, I was alright in Sam's book – a person fit to become an anthropologist! As we drove off, Sam told me that the little ceremony of pouring a few drops of whatever you were drinking on the ground was a toast to former drinking buddies who were no longer around – but that you usually only did that when you were outside, since you wouldn't want to pour it on the floor! (Sam, I'll pour you one the next time I'm drinking outside).

The rest of the weekend was just a happy blur, and I also discovered what a powwow really was for – dancing, meeting a new girl friend or boy friend, just having fun. Drinking, too, although that officially was banned, but it didn't stop anyone that I could see. I discovered that the best part of a powwow—the real part—starts after all the visitors have gone. In the middle of the night, the music started up again, and young kids with blankets wrapped around their shoulders started dancing in a circle, boys going one way, girls the other, till they started pairing up.

Late Sunday afternoon, Sam drove me back to Winnipeg. I don't know about him, but I was sure "emotionally and physically drained." I was slumped on the front seat of the car like a sack of wet laundry. Somewhere half-way home, I remember Sam turning to me and grinning. We'd had a hell of a time, hadn't we? That was some course – I'd never had that kind of relationship with a professor before or since.

I remember thinking: this was one of the best times I'd had in my life, and this guy, Sam, not only does he get to do this all the time, he gets PAID for it! (I think I had a rather distorted idea of what "fieldwork" was like at that point). I knew right there and then, that I was going to become an anthropologist too. And, eventually, I did. To this day my favorite part of being an anthropologist is doing fieldwork. Not so much drinking and partying, but traveling around the world, meeting fascinating people that I'd never meet otherwise. I've got the best job in the world, as far as I'm concerned, and I owe it all to Sam.

His influence was immeasurable. He helped me get into graduate school. He helped me get started on my first "real" fieldwork experience. He was in England at the time, but he gave me a few names of people to look up in Ft. Qu'Appelle and the Standing Buffalo reserve. I drove out there on my own during the mid-term break in my first year in the Masters Program at U of M. I met all sorts of wonderful people, made some great friends, and became friends with several different families. I learned a lot there – for example, not to get too close to your subjects. I became such good friends with the people there, that I could never bring myself to study them, or write about them. I learned not to make that same mistake in subsequent fieldwork. Sam didn't teach me that directly, but he gave me the opportunity to find that out for myself.

Later, he gave me my start in studying the people that have taken up most of my professional life – the Métis. He had a small project on the Métis he was doing for a government agency, and he hired me one summer (I was already in grad school) to do some work in St. Laurent, Manitoba. It didn't lead to much in and of itself, but it got me started, and it really took off when I began working for the Manitoba Métis Federation the next year. I guess what I'm trying to say is that Sam gave me so much – practically my whole career.

I have so many other memories of him. His dogs, for example. The first dog of his I met was Brant, a black lab, of course (all of his dogs, except Whiskey, a chocolate lab, were black labs). And I remember Tiki and Totem, Tiki's wonderful puppies, and then Hooligan and Mischief, and finally, Whiskey. Brant was a very well-behaved dog – because Sam's parents were taking care of him, as Sam was back and forth between England, Ft. Qu'Appelle and Winnipeg at the time. The rest of his dogs,

were maybe not so well behaved.

Sam had his own unique way of “training” dogs – which was to allow them to do whatever they wanted. “They’re perfectly trained – to my specifications” he’d harrumph, if anyone questioned their manners. Hooligan and Mischief were a good example of the results of Sam’s training techniques. He allowed them to chew on anything they wanted to in the house. They started on a couch once, and over the course of a year or so, totally devoured it. By the time Sam threw it out, there was nothing but the wooden frame and the wire structures for the cushions. I once suggested to Sam that the dog’s behavioral problems might be due to their names—Mischief and Hooligan—determining their behavior. We briefly changed their names to “Decorum” and “Courtesy.” It didn’t help.

One of Sam’s street-kid friends had a unicycle, which he’d left at Sam’s. Sam kept it in the sauna in the upstairs bathroom (where else would you keep a unicycle?) Mischief learned to open the sauna door by turning the wooden handle; he did this one day, hauled the unicycle out of the sauna, took it to the middle of the living room and totally chewed the seat off. There was nothing left of the seat except a sharp pipe sticking upwards – I’ve always had a picture in my mind of someone trying to ride it in that condition. I have no idea what Sam told the kid when he came back to get his unicycle. I would have liked to have been there.

I got to know his parents well, too – his father, Cecil Corrigan, teller of wonderful and funny stories, and his mother Viola, who was an old school chum of Margaret Mead’s. I remember Sam showing me a Christmas card he’d received from Margaret Mead the year he completed his PhD. Other memories of Sam include him, my wife Pat, and Jaxon Beardy and me traveling together, attending a powwow at Standing Buffalo.

The last fieldwork he did was with street kids in Vancouver. He was doing that before I came to Brandon, and had finished it about two years after I came. I read several chapters of the book Sam was writing about the kids – it was beautiful, and moving, and insightful. It was a shame he never finished it – he never seemed to care much for his own writing; he was always more interested in promoting the writings of others in the *CJNS* (he never published his PhD dissertation either, which was a real shame). But the work in Vancouver was too difficult for him to continue writing – so many of the kids he came to know were dying of AIDS and drug overdoses. One thing he did publish, that was based on his early fieldwork, was an excellent and insightful analysis of a prairie powwow.

I remember Sam’s coming to Brandon, working with various education programs, then moving over to the sociology/anthropology depart-

ment, and finally the Native Studies department. I remember my eventually joining the Native Studies department myself; of trips we took together after that, often on his beloved trains. We rode the train “The City of New Orleans” all the way from Chicago to New Orleans one year when we were attending a conference. Then there was the first time we took students down to the States, also on a train, to visit Native Studies departments in Santa Fe and Berkeley (a trip my daughter, who knew and loved Sam too, called “Sam and Joe’s Bogus Journey” after a well known movie of the time). That was the start of many trips Sam would take with his students to Santa Fe. And I remember a trip that Sam, my daughter, my nephew’s son, and several of Sam’s grandchildren and I made to Minneapolis.

Of course, it wasn’t all fun – as colleagues, we didn’t always see eye-to-eye (it is not always ideal to end up in the same department as one’s mentor). There was the heartbreak of watching Sam’s slow physical and mental deterioration in his last months, but even then there were some good moments; the way he’d brighten up whenever Mary Malainey and I would visit him in the hospital, for example. He was physically weak, and confused about time, perhaps, but there was always the glimmer of the old intellect and humor there as Mary and I would talk to him about what was going on in the department. He was still capable of reading his beloved *CJNS*, and he was so happy to know that it was continuing after he’d left the university.

So, goodbye, old friend. If we ever meet again, I hope it’s at some big powwow up in the sky.

Joe Sawchuk
Department of Anthropology
Brandon University

Sam believed in me when I was just starting out in the academic world. I submitted my article on Big Bear, and he quickly responded and expressed interest. One Sunday afternoon, he drove all the way from Brandon to Regina to talk about my article. I still remember him outside the old Saskatchewan Indian Federated College trailers with his brief case in hand and a serious and philosophical look on his face. He made me feel like my work was valuable and worthwhile. He also gave me my first paid gig as a writer in 2001. I also always deeply respected the fact that in the early days he put some of his own money into the *Canadian Journal of Native Studies*. Sam Corrigan believed in the discipline of

Indigenous Studies through such actions, and helped create a space for young punks such as myself. I hope that I can, at least in a small way, encourage younger writers and academics in the same way that Sam encouraged me.

Neal McLeod
Department of Indigenous Studies
Trent University

When I think of Sam Corrigan, three things come to mind, his forward thinking, generosity, and books. In the early 70's Sam started using Native literature in his courses, long before anyone else realized that this literature had a place in the academy. Sam recognized the need of all people for their stories and the value that these stories have as a teaching tool.

Sam also started the *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* and was the editor until he was forced by ill health to give up a job he loved. During his tenure he did whatever was necessary to keep the journal viable from applying for grants to packing boxes and taking journals down to the States to be mailed in order to save postage on American subscriptions.

Sam was generous and not only with his money and he gave freely of that. He frequently taught spring and summer session course, to support causes he believed in. He was the "largest giver" to the WUSC Refugee programme over a twenty year time period. But he also gave freely of his time and expertise.

Books were another of Sam's passions. He collected books and filled his house with them to the point that he had to build on to have room for himself. He also realized if he was going to use the literature to teach his classes then he needed to build the library collection. And build he did. I remember the excited phone calls when he was off collecting. "Linda, I just found ... do we have a copy in the library?" The joy when he found something that we didn't have! The enthusiasm and persistence with which he searched for that special edition was quite contagious. The collection he started in the 1970s and worked on until the last years of his life, is the best in the world. And he continues to support the collection today. This year the endowment he started to support the Aboriginal literature collection provided the first disbursement.

Our collaboration started with the collection, spread to organizing readings, creating and running the Summer Institute of Indigenous Stud-

ies, and the idea of a festival of Aboriginal literature. It is very fitting that we will be launching a special issue of the *Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, the literature issue, during a festival that was a dream of his and just a couple of days after what would have been his 70th birthday. My only regret is that he will not be with us to celebrate. Happy birthday Sam.

Linda Burrige
University Librarian
Brandon University