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## My Uncle Sandy

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## My Uncle Sandy

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I didn't always know that I wanted to be an anthropologist, but I knew that I wanted to have a life like my uncle Sandy. As a child, he always sent me curios from Brazil and Guatemala: wood carvings of snakes and turtles, small baskets, and colorful weavings. In my house, my mother hung beautiful black and white photographs of Yanomami Indians that Sandy had sent us as gifts. The photographs, the wood-carved animals, the ornate baskets, and all the other gifts captured my imagination as a child, and I wanted to travel to the places he had been and see the people he had seen. As the years passed, Sandy's work as an anthropologist became more than just a fascination for me. In ninth grade, students in my English class were required to make presentations about their future careers. While most aspired to become lawyers, doctors, and engineers, I said that I would be an anthropologist.

When I went to college, I didn't initially study anthropology, but I later gravitated towards it after becoming frustrated with other fields. Although Sandy and I never really "talked shop," he always encouraged my study of anthropology and my desire to work in Latin America. Now I wish I would've spoken to him more about his career and work, but perhaps we didn't have to talk about anthropology because he gave me something more important: a real appreciation for lives outside of my own, especially those of people who are marginalized, subjugated, or oppressed.

As a sophomore in college, we were on vacation together at the Outer Banks of North Carolina. In Sandy's room stood an ungodly stack of books. He had more books than I could've read over the course of a month, much less during a week of "vacation." But Sandy didn't seem to stop reading or working, not even when he was on vacation.

Most anthropologists are deeply concerned with social inequalities, human rights, and the defense of marginalized groups, particularly indigenous peoples. But for Sandy, these were more than simple concerns, these were his passions. His book, *Victims of the Miracle* (1977), is a classic in Brazilian anthropology because it shows how the supposed Brazilian economic "miracle" of the 1970s led to the destruction of indigenous lands in Amazonia and the victimization of its indigenous peoples. However, beyond pointing to these injustices in books, Sandy also played a very active role in defending indigenous peoples. Only recently I

learned that during the Guatemalan civil war of the 1980s, Sandy identified an army coronel responsible for “sweeps” that terrorized the displaced Cakchiquel people, and he informed the coronel that he and others were watching the Guatemalan Army’s actions (Barreiro 2010). His vigilance likely saved the lives of numerous Cakchiquel as the Guatemalan army later allowed them to return to their villages (Barreiro 2010). For Sandy, the notion of “applied” anthropology probably seemed redundant; to be an anthropologist was to fight for indigenous people.

When Sandy passed away, I was in the Brazilian Amazon conducting my dissertation research in smallholder farming communities on the Madeira River. I felt sorry for not leaving Brazil and going home for his service, but when I sat and thought about it, I realized that I was doing exactly what Sandy would have wanted me to do: being together with a people that he hardly knew but probably would’ve felt close to, much like the people that he worked all throughout his career defending; people that gave his life meaning.

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