

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 (SSHRCC), 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
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