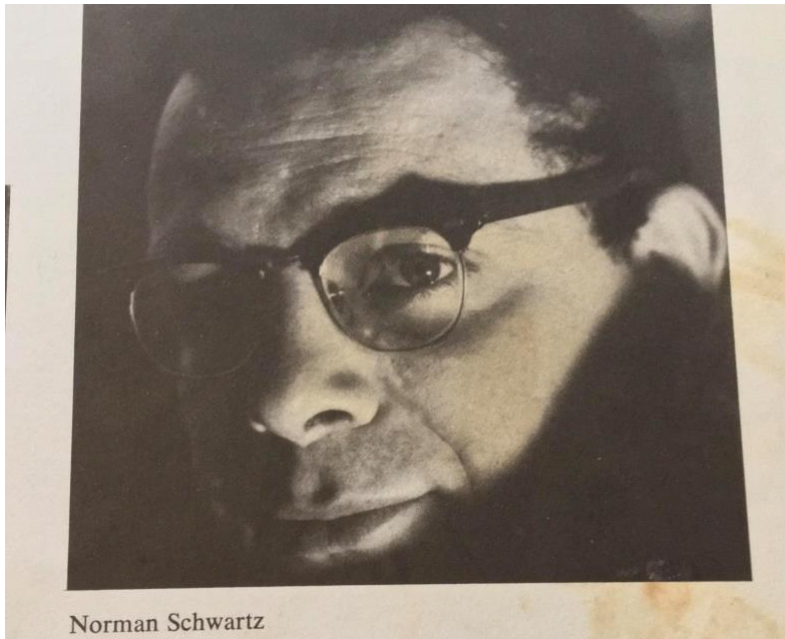


## A TRIBUTE TO NORMAN B. SCHWARTZ (1932-2018)

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USA



Norman Schwartz

Middlebury, 1963

Over five and a half decades, Norman B. Schwartz (1932-2018) was witness to one of world's most dramatic frontier settlement processes in northern Guatemala's forested department of Petén. With the creation of the Maya Biosphere Reserve in 1992, the Petén produced a sudden tropical "boom" in graduate degrees. Norman Schwartz mentored dozens of foreign students and provided years of selfless mentorship to a new generation of Guatemalan professionals seeking degrees at the local public university. Formally working as an advisor to a nonprofit funded by USAID, Dr. Schwartz also influenced (over coffee and cigarettes) a multitude of consultants from many donor agencies. As senior advisor to everyone, he patiently briefed legions of gringos—consultants, project managers, students, volunteers—that passed through the region. Even though development bank bureaucrats routinely ignored his advice and too often stiffed him with the restaurant tab, he continued to give generously of his time and deep knowledge of Petén to anyone who asked for help. Had the World Bank listened to his advice about

land tenure or IDB managers actually read his report they commissioned on participation, a good deal of human tragedy could have been saved.


As Dr. Schwartz approached hospice, I solicited tributes from friends and colleagues that he might read in his final days. As word of his illness and then his passing spread, more messages poured in from those who had the good fortune of working with him in Guatemala or at the University of Delaware. These tributes speak to his wisdom about the value of slow village fieldwork in an age of transient ethnography; the ethnographic skills, stance, and sense of humor needed for improving applied conservation and development projects; management of large survey projects; support for human rights; and wise advice for general academic life. Without the pretense and posturing that pervades academic writing today, they give us a glimpse of a wonderful human soul who modeled values of humility, kindness, patience, curiosity and other values rapidly being lost to the fast, neoliberal university. The full set of tributes are available on the website of the University of Delaware's Department of Anthropology: <https://www.anthropology.udel.edu/people/in-memoriam>

Below is a formal summary of Norman's life and academic trajectory (co-authored with John Hawkins) and my own remembrances of him.

Throughout his life, Norman B. Schwartz had been both a productive scholar and, more importantly, a human being of enormous character, compassion, service to others, and wry good humor. In this note, we briefly summarize his academic life and university service, but choose to focus more on how many of us have experienced his wonderful characteristics as a friend and fellow on the path of living a good life among, and to the benefit of, others.

Norman Schwartz had deep roots in the Jewish tradition. His grandparents on both sides – Polish Jews who had moved to Russia – had immigrated to the United States around 1913. Sadly, relatives who stayed disappeared in the tragedies of the Russian Revolution, World War II, and the Holocaust. Born in 1932, in a working-class factory district of Brooklyn, Norman was the first of his family to attend college. At CUNY, he majored in Philosophy, graduating in 1958.

When sharing a ride in a train car, Norm spotted Delia Tyvand, known to all as "Dilly." He didn't speak to her, but luckily, found her again at the university. They became friends, dated for a year, and married in 1955. They remained side by side, seatmates in their life travels until Dilly died in August 2015.

Trained in four-field anthropology by Ruben Reina at  University of Pennsylvania, Norman excelled at his discipline's meticulous social, cultural, political, and economic understanding of human lives. He first traveled to Petén with Dilly in 1960 for his dissertation fieldwork with *milperos* (corn growers) of San Andrés. Upon his return, he taught for six years at Middlebury College before completing his PhD in 1968 and moving to the University of Delaware that same year.



Garden fieldwork with Corzo

At Delaware, he was tenured, served as chair for five years, and taught courses in general anthropology, development, Mesoamerica, and the Middle East until his retirement in 2005. Both at Middlebury and at the University of Delaware, he served for many years as advisor and guide in the Hillel programs of Jewish campus life. He was an active reviewer of numerous scholarly journals and university presses; he also edited or coedited the *Delaware Review of Latin American Studies* for 17 years. Norman presented at no less than 95 conferences since 1970, including at least two score after retirement.

His interests spanned the full gamut of cultural anthropology, with publications on the Petén about the micro-economics of livelihood, religion, family life, politics, education, and ecological conservation. As a dedicated fieldworker, he always maintained an observant eye to understanding intense and complex local detail within a broader national and global context. Norman consistently contributed to academic publications where ethnographic detail and implications for theory mattered. Throughout his life, Norman focused on the issues arising from progressive and increasingly rapid deforestation and consequent loss of bio- and cultural-diversity. Anyone seeking to master social and economic life in the Petén, or wishing to understand the forest/human interface anywhere in the world, must engage with Norman's lifework.

Petén was his passion and the lifelong center of his research, informal teaching, and mentoring. Forgoing the romance and conveniences of working in and out of highland Guatemala and the capital city, Norman devoted his career to understanding the Maya lowlands. A true Mesoamericanist, Dr. Schwartz conducted comparative fieldwork and engaged in applied projects in central Panama, Belize, Quintana Roo, Costa Rica, and El Salvador, and he also consulted colonial archives in Spain.

When he first traveled to Petén, this region (a third of Guatemala's territory) was home to just a few thousand people in towns more aptly described as forest outposts. Interested in cross-cultural psychology as well as milpa, his early scholarship spanned a range of topics about Petenero worldview – from conflict/law/factionalism, religious life, folk tales, assimilation, community values, and even dream analysis. He remained friends of the families who were his "key informants" for decades and delighted in the birth of their children, grandchildren, and onto great and great-great grandchildren. With

his wife Dilly, he followed and kept touch with many San Andreseños who emigrated to “El Norte.”

Together, they helped untold numbers of Petén youth with costs for their studies, including the late Carlos Soza, ProPetén’s esteemed director from 1992 to 2003. Recognizing Carlos’s intelligence, Norman introduced him to an oilman, who later supported Carlos as an exchange student in high school. The English skills he acquired enabled Carlos to navigate complex politics with foreign donors and NGOs after the creation of the Maya Biosphere Reserve. After Carlos’s passing, Norman managed a scholarship fund for Petenero youth named in Soza’s honor.

Although Petén was an area of conflict during the Guatemalan civil war, Norman was one of the few anthropologists with the courage to continue fieldwork in the 1980s, even after military authorities hauled him to the military base for questioning about his land research. He logged 49 trips to the field for an estimated 15 years of fieldwork and likely walked the length of Petén twenty times over with his favorite ethnographic subjects, the gum tappers of Petén known as “chicleros.”

Officially the director of “ecotourism” for Conservation International’s ProPetén project, Norman’s real job from 1992-1995 was general advisor to the MAYAREMA project (a ten-year USAID program in support of the Maya Biosphere Reserve) and to prevent the gringos from total folly. Thus began his famous “coffee talks” at his favorite Las Puertas restaurant with legions of project managers, technicians, students, donors, and others interested in Petén’s conservation. Always wrestling with the “damned machines” (computers) in ProPetén, he led a stunning number of surveys for applied and basic research—from village questionnaires about project benefits to thousand-person stratified surveys endorsed and used by the government for planning. Norman excelled at developing proxy indicators that were better representatives for household wealth than income.

Norman had eye for patterns and repetitions, and a strong sense of continuity permeates his scholarship. An expert on *swidden* (clearing farmland by burning) on par with Hal Conklin, his longitudinal fieldwork on milpas (spanning 57 years) is an ecocultural treasure. From copious notes from the colonial archives, he can show that the price of a hundred pounds of corn was basically the same number of labor days in 1765 as 2015. Ground-truthing research he led with NASA helped advance understanding of the promises and limits of satellite forest cover images as a proxy measure for conservation. His 2015 co-authored publication, “Swidden Counts: Production, Carrying Capacity and Sustainability in the Southern Maya Lowlands” (*Journal of Anthropological Research*), is an ethnographic masterpiece that challenges the conventional wisdom of archaeology, climate change, demography, and conservation strategy of the last several decades.



An active scholar into his late eighties, his most recent work documenting the value of traditional home gardens for household nutrition and income is a must-read for scholars and agencies interested in helping to improve food security. All told, he was the author of seven books and monographs, thirty-three technical reports, and eighty-one articles (with more in process even as he approached the end of life).

He was honored on multiple occasions with honorary diplomas and invitations for the prestigious inaugural lecture of the Petén branch of the San Carlos, Guatemala's public university (Centro Universitario de el Petén). He received the Petén Order for Cultural Merit, the highest prize awarded by Petén's governor's council. A founding board member of ProPetén when it became a Guatemalan nonprofit in 2002, he was elected into honorary emeritus status by its governing assembly in 2005.

In the Petén, to refer to someone as an "hombre de maíz" is a complement of the highest order. From his expertise on milpa to his love of conversation over coffee, eggs, tortillas and copious amounts of habanero sauce, Norman is and always will be a true Man of Maize, as evident in the tributes that friends, colleagues, and mentees submitted in his remembrance.

"Kiddo, my ulcer's killing me; let's get a cup of coffee and talk about your time in El Cruce." I first met Norman June 18, 1993 when I arrived in Petén to spend six months as a volunteer for a Guatemalan conservation organization, ProPetén. Norman and ProPetén's director, the late Carlos Soza, apparently made side bets on how long I would last. A previous gringa volunteer had just melted down and marshaled her considerable political capital to question whether foreign volunteers should be placed in communities where (heavens!) pigs roamed the streets. Carlos decided that if I was to stay, I would be sent to a remote village about five hours via bus to teach environmental education in the local school and work as a village extensionist under Norman's supervision.

Off I went. Norman told me to check out the village and come back after a few days. He said the villagers would figure I would never return, so when I did, they'd be impressed and trust me. His trick worked. Every week, I would hop a ride back into town for the required staff meeting and then hustle back to the village that afternoon or the next day. Once a month, I'd come for a Sunday and write a technical report for Carlos and elaborate upon it in another report for Norman. In our debriefs about those dot-matrix printed reports which I have



With Liza Grandia "Kiddo" at the 2016  
LASA Conference

kept all these years, he taught me how to ask anthropological questions and observe meaning in the most everyday circumstances. In retrospect, I realize he extracted a lot of field notes from me, but in the process, I discovered my life's destiny in anthropology.

Norman had taken a three-year leave from the University of Delaware to work as an advisor to Conservation International's Guatemala program called ProPetén. Advising everyone on cultural matters, he was a genius at planting ideas that others embraced and believed to be their own. In this, he was like the sage Lao Tzu whose instruction for social change is now legend ("Go to the people. Live with them. Learn from them. Love them. Start with what they know. Build with what they have. But with the best leaders, when the work is done, the task accomplished, the people will say 'We have done this ourselves'.")

An excellent judge of character, Norman could also smell when someone was pumping him for intelligence for the wrong reasons. Perhaps my favorite memory of Norman was the night he put a DEA agent to sleep in Las Puertas. A persistent fellow, this agent had pressed both of us separately for information. Spotting Norman and me at the restaurant, the agent just invited himself to join our table. "That's a very interesting question," Norman remarked to a pointed inquiry from the agent, "but to understand what's happening today, we need to return to colonial history." Two hours later, Norman was purposefully droning on about Spanish archives, and that DEA agent never bothered us again.

In an all-too-fast academic world where no one seems to have time to be generous anymore, Norman was the inspiration for my recent article "Slow Ethnography." Indeed, from the beginning, his infectious love for fieldwork saved me from the temptations of staying in town to attend this or that meeting or workshop. These could seem urgent but were really forgettable. Norman always emphasized to me that good ethnography required spending the longest stretches possible in the villages.

Novices often start ethnographic interviews trying to prove to their informants how much they know. Norman taught me that humility, goofiness, and starting with easy questions was the best way to convince someone to open their local wisdom and knowledge. "Really? That's how you milk a cow?" will get you a lot further with a cattle rancher than letting him know you *already* know about the cost price points of veterinary products. You have to listen to fifty repetitive stories about pasture management until an informant surprises you with surprising new information about herbicides. Understanding pattern and variation is the soul of anthropology. In aberration we learn something novel about the rule. Well into his 80s, Norman was still questioning what he knew about milpa. He'd always remark that the more he learned about Petén, the less he knew.

Norman traveled only with a carry-on bag from the U.S. to Petén (usually with his famous red shirt) and could melt into the countryside for days on end with only a small

“manpurse.” No one in Petén knew he could actually drive. He learned more hitchhiking or talking with a driver. If a ride wasn’t available, Norman would just start out walking, figuring someone would be curious to pick up a white-haired gringo

Norman had a gift for eliciting stories and gossip. He was always taking mental field notes, but also managed to maintain the privacy of key informants who, over the years, grew old with him. Though aligned with conservation, Norman had a knack for maintaining ethnographic neutrality. People of all persuasions—loggers, looters, businessmen, doctors, scientists, politicians, road engineers, even soldiers—confided in Norman. “How do you *know* that?” I often wondered about another piece of juicy gossip he somehow acquired, even while stateside. Any debrief with Norman after a meeting invariably elicited amazingly interesting details about power and politics. Even from the most tedious USAID logframe workshop, Norman could notice something intriguing.

For his continuous data on farming, forest management, and Guatemalan history and development politics, he maintained a phenomenal system of coded field notes. He first took jot notes in large caps in small 3” by 5” notebooks that he diligently typed up every night. Meticulous with numbers and measurements, he could pull out details years later about the number of hectares for reforestation discussed at some meeting in 1992. One of his most remarkable papers was a simple essay on weights and measurements that showed (rather than stated) that policy makers had made erroneous decisions because they failed to understand that a Peten “cuerda” (the amount of land that could be worked in a day) was different than a highland “cuerda.” Even while going through chemotherapy, he continued his constant mental measurements... he figured it was 7/10ths of a mile to walk the hospital from one end to another.

Irreverent and provocative in the classroom, he relished telling stories about how students reported him to his dean (football players apparently did not appreciate having their protective padding compared to the regalia worn in indigenous masculinity rituals). Of his own scholarship, he never took criticism personally. He shrugged and said, perhaps even those with whom he most vehemently disagreed about milpa or forestry were right. He taught me to play it cool and to remember the expression that “revenge is a meal best eaten cold.” He often also quoted the Chinese proverb to “be careful what you wished for.” Both saved me from send a lot of hot-headed emails in my indignant youth.

Over a quarter century, Norman and I shared data, compared field notes, and gossiped relentlessly. Over twenty-four years of friendship and collaboration, we sent 1,677 letters back and forth by email. I do say “letters” rather than messages, because like his generation, Norman had a flair for correspondence. Most made me chuckle if not chortle. With an infectious laugh, his sense of humor was more like the guys on NPR’s “Car Talk” than Eddie Murphy; he could spark amusement from the most mundane observations of human character. In lieu of anger, Norman chose to laugh at absurdity.

His wit, compassion, and impeccable manners were present in every letter. Knowing my penchant to work too hard, most messages closed with kindly advice to rest, read a trashy detective novel, and with the salutation: “Take it easy, Norman.”

Many well-educated people in Petén believe that Norman is my father or my professor and cannot be convinced otherwise. How else to explain our camaraderie across so many generations? Norman and I were the best of friends, but in a sense, he *was*



my intellectual father, as I would not be an anthropologist without his influence. He is the only human being with whom I’ve repeatedly had fourteen-hour continuous conversations. My favorite memories of academic conferences are those days when we would meet at a greasy spoon diner for breakfast, then eventually move to another greasy spoon diner for lunch, wander back to the conference and rope someone else into the conversation, and keep talking until it was time to find some place where he could get French fries or pizza (Norman’s diet was always atrocious) and I might find some kale.

Although he made me play hooky from many AAA or LASA panels, he always made a point of attending the Sunday morning 8 am panels where conference organizers tended to relegate the graduate students. He wanted them to have an audience, since often no one would show up but the students. That was quintessentially Norman—intellectually generous and never expecting credit—and always ready for a cup of a coffee and chat.