

If there's hope...

By Nick Kawa

Lately, to be honest, academic anthropology has caused an increasing pessimism within me. But I don't want to subvert the goals or intentions of this roundtable so I've decided to center my comments on the work of a mentor who modeled a more optimistic vision of anthropology for me and for many others.

As an undergraduate at the University of Arizona, I had the great fortune of working under Diane Austin. Diane now serves as the chair of the School of Anthropology at the University of Arizona, but at the time that I met her she was a research associate at the Bureau of Applied Research in Anthropology, or BARA. I was a snooty kid from suburban Chicago and junior at U of A, but Diane was generous enough to offer me the opportunity to work on a Binational Environmental Educational Project on the US-Mexico Border, which later became known as the Ambos Nogales Revegetation Partnership. The details of the research are probably not so important here, but what Diane did as a mentor, a leader, and an anthropologist are significant. She consistently dedicated time and attention to a group of undergraduate researchers—of which I was part—who had very little practical research experience of any kind. She taught us the ropes, gave us real responsibilities working with community partners, and she even paid us to do our work. She simultaneously advised a half dozen or so graduate students on the project, both in coordinating research activities and meetings for the larger project but also in their own individual research, providing guidance on methodology, on stats, on whatever they needed, really. She also coordinated work with folks in the EPA, schools and technical institutes in Sonora, and a much broader group of community partners on both sides of the border. And she did so—at least in my perception—with genuine attention and care for all of us involved, regardless of our status or social location. It is worthy of underscoring that this was just one of four major research projects that Diane led as either a PI or co-PI at the time.

It was hard for me to fully appreciate then how unique Diane was in the world of academic anthropology. What impresses me now is not her sheer dedication to work but rather to people. She communicated to us with respect, with consideration, with care. Of course, research publications needed to be written and further grants applied for, and I'm sure some people might have felt like they needed more than what they got. Perhaps more than anyone, Diane left herself with too little time and consideration, never sleeping enough and always far too self-sacrificing.

Over a year and a half, I learned many things through that project working on the borderlands—working across different languages, social and class boundaries, and national political borders too. But perhaps more than anything, I learned from Diane the importance of communicating through one's actions and words that people matter. Not just in theory, but in practice, by continually placing your attention directly to the individuals in front of you.

Now I recognize that I haven't said a single thing about optimism since I began talking about Diane, but in simplest terms, I'd say that people who invest in other people and care for other

people are the ones who best communicate anthropological optimism. Diane staunchly believed that it was possible to mold a better world out of the one we inhabited, but she didn't go on pontificating or belaboring this simple point. She invested in people around her, with the hope, I believe, that we might together make some kind of difference that would yield a world that was marginally more inhabitable or socially just. And if we didn't, at least we didn't treat each other like shit in the time that we did spend together on this earth.

If there's hope (and I assume the participants in this roundtable agree that there is or that there should be), then the question might be: hope for what? And where do we place that hope and with whom?

As I noted at the onset, I'm deeply ambivalent about the idea of investing hope in academic anthropology. But if there is something worth cherishing, or at least holding on to in this whole business, then it's a genuine commitment to people and building relationships that reflect this commitment. For me, then, anthropological optimism is best communicated through our dedication to our students, our families, our neighbors, our collaborators, and others who might appear along the way.

Thank you.