

The Miami Herald

Posted on Sun, Mar. 03, 2013

Juan Clark opened my eyes to the 'why'

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It was an evening class in Kendall that opened my weary mind after a day's work to why societies are what they are and do what they do — the type of preparation every journalist should have to report on the who, what, when, where and how.

The engaging sociology professor with the jet black wavy hair, twinkle in his eyes and the curious Spanish accent (curious for a man whose last name was Clark) brought a special understanding to his subject, I would learn years later. By then, his hair had become more salt than pepper and his eyes were less bright but his zeal for teaching and learning, for research and writing, for understanding what had happened in his beloved Cuba, was stronger than ever.

Miami Dade College Professor Emeritus Juan Clark, "Johnny" to his friends, was Paratrooper 2949. He parachuted into battle at the Bay of Pigs in a war for the soul of his homeland. A university student and devout Catholic, Johnny was among a generation of Cubans who sought democracy for their country when Fulgencio Batista rigged the 1952 elections to stay in power.

A charismatic lawyer named Fidel Castro promised democracy, yet within a few months of the revolution's victory it was clear that a totalitarian dictatorship was sweeping Cuba. Johnny, his brothers and friends joined the counter-revolutionaries. But President Kennedy's last-minute decision to not provide air power to the young Cuban force left Johnny and the 2506 Brigade with little choice but to surrender.

In prison, Clark made a rosary out of pieces of wood and would lead his compatriots in praying the rosary every night. He became good at cutting his friends' hair, too, and decades later would still serve as the pro-bono barber for his closest friends.

Clark met Castro twice, he told me. Once when the Brigadistas were captured, and again before he was released from prison and sent to the U.S. when the dictator, apparently impressed by the paratroopers' performance in battle, spoke to the group in what became an exchange of their political philosophies. Clark said Castro told him, "You are a little bit confused," and promised to send him some books that would "rectify" the facts.

The books never arrived, nor did Johnny expect or want them. The professor would go on to write his own books about Cuba and also about his Catholic faith. Just three years ago, he collaborated with various writers for a book project sponsored by the nonprofit Facts About Cuban Exiles (FACE). *Cubans: An Epic Journey*, is a treasure trove of information.

Sam Verdeja, who started FACE in 1982, told me that Clark spent two years writing and rewriting — by hand, no less — the three chapters he oversaw. He could cite page numbers for every other topic written by others in the book, too. “His love for Cuba was only matched by his love for his wife Clarita and their children and grandchildren,” Verdeja said.

Guillermo Martinez, a former Herald editor, knew Clark since they were students in Havana. “Johnny was very exact in his language and he took such care in all he wrote,” Martinez said. “He’s of that generation that’s leaving us.”

Juan “Johnny” Clark, devoted husband, father and grandfather, freedom fighter and academic, left us last week at age 73.

Back in 1980 when I was taking his sociology class I learned from the engaging professor what makes societies do what they do, but also why we should care. A decade after that class, I received a questionnaire from him in the mail. He was tracking his former students to study what my generation of Cuban-born kids with American sensibilities were doing.

Five years ago, when we met again, I would remind him I was the one in the front row who asked lots of questions. He said he was proud of all I had accomplished. I never got to tell him how privileged I was to have been his student.

Viewing for Clark will be from 4 p.m. to 11 p.m.. Monday at Caballero Rivero Woodlawn Funeral Home, 11655 SW 117th Ave.

At 10 a.m. Tuesday, there will be a Mass at St. Louis Catholic Church, 7220 SW 120th St. Burial will follow.

Instead of flowers, the family requests that donations be made to the University of Miami – Institute for Cuban and Cuban American Studies (ICCAS) – “Juan M. Clark Memorial Lecture Series on Cuba”. University of Miami, ICCAS, 1531 Brescia Ave., Coral Gables, Fl. 33146.

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