

# In Remembrance of Thomas W. Walker

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Photo by Kipper Blakeley

Thomas W. Walker—outstanding teacher, unconventional mentor, and committed scholar—died on May 2, 2023, in Columbus, Ohio. He spent his last days surrounded by his family and friends. A political scientist and farmer, Tom built a Latin American studies program that trained a wide range of professionals, from scholars and development experts to government officials, instilling in them a commitment to democratic principles, fairness, and inclusive societies.

I met Tom when he directed the Latin American studies program at Ohio University. My wife, Mirna, and I arrived in rural Athens from Buenos Aires in August 1990 to pursue an MA in international affairs. In those first days, filled with orientation sessions and the search for free furniture, we didn't know that we were about to join a cohort of young idealists who wanted to learn as much as possible about Latin America and the Caribbean and the role of the United States in the region.

Tom was an engaging teacher who respected every viewpoint and encouraged deep, frank discussions. I will never forget his well-rounded, articulate, insightful analysis of the factors that lead to US interventions in Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, and Nicaragua, among other countries. His seminar on revolution in Latin America was one of the very best I have taken in my life. The power of superb teaching becomes evident not at the end of a term but when you remember a course more than three decades later.

Tom ran an annual research seminar in Nicaragua for LASA. The [Fall 1987 issue](#) of the *LASA Forum* published an account of the third seminar, which included meetings with government officials, grassroots activists, opposition leaders, and others. The article includes a great photo that shows Tom leading a meeting with the director of the Program for the Study of Popular Participation. In the background, one can see the portraits of Augusto César Sandino and Carlos Fonseca. Tom was a member of the team of scholars that LASA sent to observe the Nicaraguan elections in February 1990, and he was later invited to join the Carter Center's delegations to observe other elections in Latin America.

Upon completing his undergraduate studies with a major in political science from Brown University in the 1960s, he became disillusioned with the discipline and, according to his own account, burned all his textbooks. Of course, the natural next step after burning one's textbooks is to engage in grassroots work, so Tom joined the Peace Corps and was sent to northern Colombia. The experience was transformational. He enrolled

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in the University of New Mexico to pursue a PhD in political science. His dissertation focused on Brazil, but a research trip to Nicaragua in the late 1960s sparked a decades-long connection with the country. He published extensively on Central America and became one of the foremost US experts on Nicaragua. His *Understanding Central America* (now in its seventh edition), coauthored with John Booth and Christine Wade, is a classic in the field.

Tom didn't care much about academic prestige, nor did he hold great admiration for university administrators. He loved to tease me about my leadership positions of increasing responsibility. He believed that university resources were better spent supporting students than expanding the university bureaucracy. He played a major role in denouncing the US war against the Sandinistas, always with a focus on its devastating impact on the Nicaraguan people.

Following his retirement from Ohio University, Tom donated his personal papers to the University of Pittsburgh Library. The Thomas W. Walker Collection on Nicaraguan Politics, 1970s–1990s is a fascinating archive of “correspondence, newspapers clippings, documents related to the literacy and post-literacy process, Christians in the revolution, human rights reports, posters from the 1990 election, and more ephemera.” The Center for Latin American Studies at Pitt invited Tom to deliver a lecture at the Hillman Library to inaugurate the collection. His talk, “One Scholar’s Half Century Affair with Nicaragua,” was an inspirational overview of his extraordinary career.

Tom’s commitment to helping others went beyond higher education. He was an advocate for people living with mental illness, primarily through his volunteer work in the Athens Chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness. Among other initiatives, he became involved in a program to train police officers in southeastern Ohio in how to respond and connect to someone in a mental health crisis.

Tom and the love of his life, Anita, raised four children. I know very few families that bring together spirituality, green energy advocacy, and the best homemade sausages in the world. To celebrate the transformational impact of Tom and Anita, Ohio University’s Center for International Studies established the Thomas and Anne Walker Latin American Studies Endowment. The Walker fund “provides financial support for students whose research and academic pursuits advance the study of Latin America and awareness of the region and its global relevance.” The fund continues to grow thanks to the generosity of many friends, relatives, and former students.

There was a clear method behind the scholarship and mentorship that Tom Walker developed over his academic career. He was an early adopter of engaged scholarship and believed that higher education had to play a role in democratic accountability. He pioneered decolonizing area studies and interdisciplinary collaboration. This is an agenda that empowers people, advances a truly diverse academic community, and unleashes intellectual creativity. Tom championed these ideals with humility, kindness, and a terrific sense of humor. His legacy will be with us forever. //