

# CLAUDIA ZASLAVSKY: IN MEMORIAM

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Claudia Zaslavsky died on Friday, January 13, 2006, at the Harlem Community Hospice, one day after completing 89 years. She was born on January 12, 1917, in New York City. The cause of death was pancreatic cancer.

For all of us who had the privilege of being Claudia's friends, her death was a great pain. We will all miss her critical remarks and generous suggestions.

Claudia is survived by her husband Sam; her sons Thomas, of Endwell, New York, and Alan, of Cambridge, Massachusetts; grandchildren Clara Zaslavsky Correia, of Dorchester, Massachusetts, and David, Sarah and Katherine Zaslavsky, of Endwell; and sister Lucille Dames of New York City. Sam Zaslavsky is an Emeritus Professor at Baruch College, City University of New York, Alan Zaslavsky is a Professor of Statistics at the Department of Health Care Policy of Harvard Medical School, and Thomas Zaslavsky is a Professor of Mathematics at Binghamton University/State University of New York.

It is a great honor for me to write this short note on Claudia. In writing, I am relying mainly on my memory of conversations we had. My memory received help from both the interview she gave to Stieg Mellin-Olsen in 1990, and from some data in the obituary posted on the web-site of the *International Study Group on Ethnomathematics*. Contact with Alan and Thomas was important to clarify some points. I am very grateful to them for having shared messages received on the occasion of the Memorial Service.

Claudia was raised in Allentown, Pennsylvania, where her parents had a dry goods store. There she had her early experience in the practical application of mathematics. Then she studied mathematics at Hunter College and at the University of Michigan. She was working as an accountant when World War II started and Sam went into the army. They had two children and Claudia was busy raising her children. She only did part-time book-keeping work. In her words, she was first aware of the problems facing a teacher when her children were at school. She began her teaching career only after the children were a little older.

She started teaching in a private school, Woodlands High School, in Hartsdale, north of New York City. Her choice to go to a private school not in the City was for a good reason – her refusal to sign a loyalty oath. In fact, Sam was an engineer in a plant that did war work and, in a labor dispute, had lost his job. This was in the late 40s, before the McCarthy era. Both Claudia and Sam were involved in labor relations. I will return to this aspect of Claudia's life later on. Claudia felt more secure in a private school and she worked there for six years.

Then she accepted a job in a public school. This was an integrated school, about one-third black and the rest white. In the elementary school, through grade six (11-year-old stu-



*Claudia Zaslavsky in the 1970s.*

dents), the classes were integrated but after the seventh grade (12-year-old students), the classes were streamed and some students were taking low-level mathematics, while others were taking more advanced subjects.

The fact is that low-income students and black students were dropping mathematics after a year or so of study. She was able to design a curriculum containing some algebra and some local problems, even some probability and statistics. In spite of the resistance of student-guidance counselors, some students succeeded. This curriculum was simply mathematics, without cultural concerns, but in the 60s, as part of the important affirmative action movement, students, particularly black students, were demanding culturally focused courses. Willingness to meet these demands is clearly shown by the offer of some salary credits for the preparation of courses and teaching material in Swahili and African history to teachers who wanted to use this in their classrooms. Claudia

realized how important it would be for her African-American students to have pride in their cultural heritage and, clearly, mathematics must be part of this heritage. Thus, she decided to do research and write about African mathematics.

Claudia started to look for sources on African mathematics and developed a project during a course at Teachers College of Columbia University. Soon she realized that little was known about this topic, but she was able to access the limited sources available – the Schoenberg Library, in the New York Public Library, had some books and documents. She found books written by anthropologists and missionaries describing different kinds of numeration systems, contacted specialists in African languages and African history, and started to write small pieces for mathematics teaching journals and even small books as supplementary material for textbooks.

I remember Claudia telling me, and this is confirmed in her interview for Stieg, that her interest in Africa came because her oldest son, Thomas, was very interested in that continent. He knew every African nation and every flag (Claudia says “Do not ask me why”). In 1969 her younger son, Alan, finished Harvard College and decided to go to Kenya to teach. He remained there from 1969 to 1974. Claudia visited him in 1970 and decided to engage even more in her research.

She visited the Institute of African Studies in London and obtained copies of a number of important articles. Then she contacted several scholars and acquired more important references. She went once or twice to Nigeria and visited African universities, where she had the opportunity of exchanging ideas with members of the faculty, who facilitated her contacts with other people.

She collected a good amount of material, with the added help of the photography of Sam. Donald Crowe says, in a memorial note, that his name was given to Claudia as someone “who might have information about hidden mathematics in Africa.” The result of this exhaustive research is the masterpiece *Africa Counts*, published in 1973. Donald Crowe proceeds, saying that

This was the encouragement I needed to begin the study of the geometry of African repeated patterns, instead of continuing to wait for the unlikely appearance of an interested graduate student. She used some of the material I sent her in *Africa Counts*, and her request changed the direction of my research for the next 30 years.

Indeed, *Africa Counts* was an encouragement for many mathematics educators, like myself, who were uneasy about the all pervasive Eurocentric vision of mathematics.

Claudia was not entirely happy with the way the publisher handled the book. She was very complimentary of the editor. In Claudia’s words,

she fell in love with this book because of the mere fact that I was doing something different from the mathematics books she was used to editing. She put one of the pictures from the book on the wall next to her desk and devoted all her time to this book and neglected another book.

As a consequence, the editor was fired. The publisher also handled the distribution very badly and Claudia had to promote the book herself. Claudia did manage to get a paperback edition with another publisher and the book became widely used, more than she expected, she says. The book received very good reviews, both in the US and abroad. She found out that people in mathematics departments were reading it, although it was difficult to find the book in bookstores. Then Claudia was invited to give talks at the NCTM and other meetings, even offering some workshops. In 1974-75, she had a sabbatical and developed some material for use in the middle grades and sent it to people to test in their courses. She worked for a doctorate, but did not finish it. This turned out to be a benefit for education, since Claudia devoted intensive work with this material with students. With black students, particularly, one result was a developing sense of pride in their African origins. White kids were also affected, as Claudia says, because of the integration of these courses with social studies.

A result of the successful repercussions of these workshops was an invitation from a publisher to write a book for parents willing to help their children with mathematics. The result was the book *Preparing young children for math*. In this book, she shared much of her experience in raising her two children. In fact, both became mathematicians. She used to play cultural games with them and to incorporate finger-counting songs. This book, after her retirement, was complemented by books explaining African games for students. Claudia also published several papers in journals such as *Mathematics Teacher*, *Mathematics Teaching*, *Curriculum Review* and *Teacher Magazine*, always giving examples from not only African cultures, but also from Native American cultures.

Claudia’s interest in improving education through cultural relevance was closely related to her concerns with racial discrimination, in relation to social classes. She observed that people in lower classes are disproportionately blacks, latinos and other ethnic minorities. So, she decided to bring into her subsequent books multi-cultural material through art and music. Through the arts, she opened up discussion about this disproportion by using the themes in the murals of Diego Rivera, or the rhythm of Nigerian talking drums. This is the origin of her book *Math comes alive* of 1987. She also wrote a book for children called *Zero: is it something or is it nothing?* In this book, she introduced various children of different nationalities. The editors made the illustrations animals. Claudia protested, saying:

These are children. This one is Japanese, this one is Irish and this one is African and these are their names. They are children not animals so do it again.

Another serious fight with publishers.

Claudia decided to write another book, addressed to adults, going more directly into the political strand. She claimed that the recognized fear of mathematics has socio-political causes. Examples in the book are drawn from political scenarios. This book, intended to be called *Fear of math: don’t be a victim*, was finally published as *Fear of math: how to get over it and get on with your life*. Among several examples from daily life, which included a speech of

President Reagan about military spending and the provision of these funds, Claudia shows how statistics can be manipulated in such a way that the words of politicians have the semblance of truths.

Claudia recalls that while she was doing a course for teachers, she asked one of the students to simulate a class. The 'students' were the 'teacher's' peers, including Claudia. When asking the teacher giving the lecture "why do you do this?" the answer was "Because this is the way I was taught". A major frustration for Claudia was that teachers do not ask "why?" Indeed, although we now pay more attention to the many factors affecting mathematics education, the curriculum is always the central issue. The old questions "what to teach?" and "how to teach?" continue to prevail. It is rare to consider the broader and fundamental question "why do this?" The answer has always been "Because you need this to have access to college or to a career". This has always been the tone of administrators, parents and even of educators. The students are led in their school activities as if they are "meat to produce sausages", using the dramatic image in Pink Floyd's *The wall - the movie*. This is a good dramatization of Claudia's words: "This is it. This is what you take. These are the standards".

I can imagine Claudia's reaction if she were reading the report by Sam Dillon in the New York Times of March 26, 2006, that schools across the nation are reducing, even eliminating, class time spent on social subjects, on humanities, on science and the arts, to have more time for reading and mathematics, to meet the requirements in the standardized testing. She always insisted on the importance of social subjects, on humanities, on science and the arts. She denounced, emphatically, the damage, for education, of drilling and drilling. Her critical remarks about testing as an instrument for pushing the proposals set forth by the government would be absolutely appropriate today.

With respect to the general development of teachers, Claudia was frustrated by the fact that they were ill prepared in mathematics. In giving workshops for teachers, she felt discouraged by the fact that they could not appreciate the strength of her multi-cultural materials because they had very little mathematics background.

Claudia discovered, in the *International Study Group on Ethnomathematics*, founded in 1985, an echo for her voice. She was a leading participant in the group. She wrote, "scholars of ethnomathematics examine the practice of mathematics from an anthropological point of view". She was a mentor to many younger scholars and activists in this field, always giving importance to the recognition of the

mathematical accomplishments of groups who are under-represented in the world of mathematics, including women and people of diverse cultures.

Claudia was also a lifelong activist in movements for civil rights, peace and social justice. Her long time friend, Vic Teich, recalls the occasion when they first became friends, back in February, 1947. Then, Claudia and Sam, Selma and Vic Teich and five other couples, who did not know each other, moved into temporary veterans' housing in Jackson Heights, Queens. The seven couples were brought together by a shared belief in a better world, and soon became friends. As Vic recalls, they were young, strong and determined, and they had all the answers. They were going to end war and poverty and racism and exploitation by greedy capitalists. To get started, they had to build strong trade unions and civil rights organizations and political parties like the *American Labor Party* (ALP). They joined in the formation of a tenants' association. This was soon followed by a fight and a strike "to keep kerosene at ten cents a gallon". They also adhered to the idea of a food co-op, as part of a vision of a new world of peace and plenty.

As ALP members, they engaged in the Presidential campaign and "knocked on our neighbors' doors to get out the vote for Wallace". They marched in the May Day parades and Vic recalls that they were attacked by vigilantes when campaigning for the Stockholm Peace Petition. Sam was summarily fired as an engineer at Sperry Gyroscope after the FBI declared him a "security risk".

Claudia's long time friend Beatrice Lumpkin says, in an obituary note, that their common background went back to the Great Depression of the 30s, even earlier than the Civil Rights movement of the 60s. They were among the many that fought for and won the Safety Net, which included Social Security, labor rights, minimum wage, the 40-hour week, unemployment compensation, and abolition of child labor. According to Bea, "A high degree of multiracial unity and a stepped-up fight against racism made it possible to win these gains." They wanted a system where people come first, before profit.

In celebrating Claudia's spirit and passion in the fight for a better world, her friends will continue the struggle for a world where all the people can live with mutual respect, solidarity and cooperation, without space for inequity, arrogance and bigotry. Claudia, always wise and mature, continues to inspire all of us.

A bibliography is located at <http://www.math.binghamton.edu/zaslav/cz.biblio.html>.