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# Remembering Sam Oliner: Legacy in the Memories and Lives of his Students and Friends

*We want to honor Dr. Samuel P. Oliner, one of the founders of HJSR and a Professor of Sociology at Humboldt. Dr. Oliner passed away November 17, 2021.*

*The following text is from the nomination of Dr. Oliner in 2008 for the Humboldt County Peacemaker Prize.\**

After the extermination of his family and community, Samuel P. Oliner survived the Holocaust in Europe during World War II with the help of a Polish farm family. This experience guided his development and passion for understanding how good can triumph over evil. His early research was on rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust, leading to later work on racism, ethnicism such as anti-Semitism, prejudice, and discrimination. His recent work has been on altruism, caring, heroism, apology, and forgiveness and on the promotion of behaviors congruent with these concepts. His most recent book, *Altruism, Intergroup Apology, Forgiveness and Reconciliation* (with Piotr Zylicz), is currently in press. Now retired as a professor from Humboldt State University, he is an internationally known scholar, researcher, and teacher whose list of publications and presentations fills six single-spaced pages and includes authorship of numerous books, chapters, articles, and book reviews. His life and work have inspired productions and documentaries in the U.S. and abroad including, for example, the BBC documentary *To Give or Not To Give*. He is often interviewed by domestic and international journalists for radio and television. His ethic of caring and compassion has permeated his life's work as a role model, mentor, and teacher.

Sam taught at Oakland Community College before coming to HSU in 1971. He is an Emeritus Professor of Sociology at HSU and often is invited to give lectures and workshops. His areas of expertise include such topics as the Holocaust, collective behavior, social movements, race and ethnic relations, intergroup apology and forgiveness, altruism and prosocial behavior, minorities in Eastern Europe and the former USSR, heroism, and social change. He and his wife Pearl Oliner were honored as Scholars of the Year at HSU after the publication of their seminal work *The Altruistic Personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe*. He founded the *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* in 1973 and the Altruistic Personality and Prosocial Behavior Institute in 1982 at HSU. His editorship of the *Journal* has enabled it to survive as a forum for encouraging the publication of social science research. Since retiring from HSU, he has continued his work as director of the Institute which is an important vehicle for teaching research skills to graduate students and exploring important research topics. Sam has successfully applied for many research grants over the years enabling the Institute to employ undergraduate and graduate students. He continues to foster and promote students' research into altruism, prosocial behavior, apology, and forgiveness, including many research projects in the local community.

Sam is a valuable resource to our community, his former students, and colleagues. He has served as a significant and effective role model for his students and other audiences who have been inspired by his presentations. Many teachers have been greatly influenced

by his mentoring. His former students are teaching at College of the Redwoods, HSU, and public schools in Humboldt County as well as throughout the state and country. Stephen Stamnes is a former student and mentee of Sam's and is a lecturer at HSU who teaches a class entitled *Sociology of Altruism and Compassion*, a course that was originally created and taught for many years by Sam. Steve noted, "My students in the altruism class are profoundly moved by Sam's contributions to the promotion of altruism and prosocial behaviors. Inspired by Sam's model of living a life infused with an ethic of care and compassion, an impressive number of them choose to enter the caring professions of teaching, nursing, and social work, and go on to serve this community."

Sam generously gives his time speaking in local elementary schools, high schools, and colleges, promoting the message of creating a more just and inclusive society. His book, *Toward A Caring Society: Ideas into Action*, written with his wife Pearl Oliner, noted that one way of encouraging the creation of a more peaceful and just society is by reaching out to young people. As he and Pearl wrote in *Toward A Caring Society*, "Study and teaching cannot be entirely the same if words like

'love' and 'community' become as well accepted as 'academic excellence,' 'merit,' and 'competence.'" Sam lives those values whether he is talking and working with children at Blue Lake School or providing on-going support and mentoring to graduate students during his retirement. He is constantly invited to give lectures on subjects related to how we might build a more caring, inclusive, and peaceful community. He has volunteered to give numerous guest lectures and workshops at HSU on such topics as apology and forgiveness, altruism and caring, and the Holocaust and genocide, to name a few. He has also presented at College of the Redwoods on such subjects as genocide, racism and genocide, altruism, and apology and forgiveness. According to Linda Ellis, his former student who currently teaches at CR, "Students at CR have been inspired by his presentations on apology and forgiveness. Sam is often unaware of the positive impact that his work on apology and forgiveness has had on students with whom he speaks. They have shared with me how inspired they are with his message and that it could possibly be a way to mend a broken world." He has spoken to elementary and high school students in Arcata, Eureka, McKinleyville, and Fortuna, engaging them in discussions about good and



*Celebrating Oliner 2008 Peacemaker Prize (from left to right) Jason Whitley (MA 2009), Steve Stamnes (MA 1993), Dr. Jack Schaffer, Dr. Sam Oliner, & Dr. Josh Meisel*

evil; altruism; improvement of social relations by treating others with respect and tolerance; the attributes of caring people; and deconstruction of evil, prejudice, and destructive behaviors.

Sam has also benefited the broader community. His current work on apology and forgiveness has direct applicability to inter-group relations between European American ethnic groups and the various indigenous Tribal groups of Humboldt County. He has spoken recently to the Arcata Open Door Clinic staff on altruism and caring, as well as at the Unitarian Church and the Westhaven Center for the Arts on apology and forgiveness. He conducted a workshop on altruism and forgiveness for the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute. He participated in a recent Channel 13 program on love and altruism and has volunteered to present at conferences on racism, ethnicity, and cultural inclusiveness at HSU. He is a Board member of

Temple Beth El where he teaches Yiddish classes, and he is involved in raising funds in our local community to assist people who have been victims of the genocide in Darfur.

Because of Sam's abundant contributions to our community in promoting caring, apology, and forgiveness, and in providing us—children and adults alike—with a lens through which to understand how human goodness can prevail, he is an impressive and worthy candidate for the 2008 Humboldt County Peacemaker Prize.

*\*This nomination letter is reprinted here with permission of authors Stephen Stammes, MA 1993 and retired faculty member in Sociology, Cal Poly Humboldt, and Ann Diver-Stammes, Professor Emeritus of Education, Cal Poly Humboldt. Many students and faculty were co-signers of this nomination letter. Sam Oliner was awarded the Peacemaker Prize on November 19, 2008.*



*Oliner 2008 Peacemaker Prize - Eureka Times-Standard newspaper clipping entitled "Professor promotes peace." Dated December 6, 2008.*

**Remembering Sam Oliner:  
Legacy in the Memories and  
Lives of His Students**

It's hard to think of the words "prosocial" and "heroes" without an instant smile and remembering Sam—God gets to enjoy Sam's wisdom now! Thank you Sam!

— **GREGORY C. GIBSON, PH.D.**  
*Professor of Sociology, Kent State University  
MA in Sociology (2002), Cal Poly Humboldt*

I think I speak for many when I say that Sam was not only a beacon of hope in the field of altruism and forgiveness, but he was a mentor, friend, and like family to so many. He is dearly missed and never forgotten.

— **MARK BAUERMEISTER, PH.D.**  
*Instructor, University of San Francisco  
and Foothill College  
MA in Sociology (2007), Cal Poly Humboldt*

It is difficult to find words that adequately capture who Sam Oliner was as a person, and his scholarship. I worked with Sam at the Institute in Founders Hall from 2009-2011. He started out as my boss, but quickly became my mentor and my family. Sam had a hard time saying "no" to the many schools, teachers, and reporters that would ask him to retell his life story. It was because he believed it was important that people knew about such atrocities, so society would not repeat the same hate. He also spent an equal amount of time reminding people that in the midst of hate, the world is still filled with goodness and beauty. Sam chose to live in the light and shine that light on those around him. He was a lot of things to a lot of people—a scholar, Professor, a Holocaust survivor, a mentor, and a solid human being.

Sam gave me a lot of lessons about research, scholarship, and life. There are way too many to write here, but one of the most important lessons he ever gave me was, "Never shake hands like a guppy." For two years, I would walk into the office, he would

stand up, and we would shake hands. Thanks to Sam, I have a solid handshake.

— **AMANDA BERTANA, PH.D.**  
*Assistant Professor of Sociology,  
Southern Connecticut State University  
BA and MA in Sociology (2007, 2011),  
Cal Poly Humboldt*

Sam Oliner was my mentor and friend. I had the good fortune of first working with Sam during my graduate work. He was teaching a course on the Holocaust and graciously agreed to be on my thesis committee. I later became a co-managing editor of the HJSR with my good friend, Mark Bauermeister. As young graduate students, myself, Mark and another colleague, Amanda Bertana, worked with Sam in the Altruistic Personality & Prosocial Behavior Institute, recently renamed the Altruistic Behavior Institute.

As a descendant of an Armenian Genocide survivor, I was captivated by Sam's own story of surviving the Holocaust and his ability to teach such difficult topics with consistency, conviction, and compassion. My graduate work entailed combatting denial of the Armenian Genocide. When I faced threats from genocide deniers, it was Sam who told me, "You cannot quit. They want you to quit and if you do, they win. Do not let them win." I can chart my path of weaving together activism and academia directly back to that moment in Sam's office. He encouraged me to continue writing so that I could use my platform to educate and agitate.

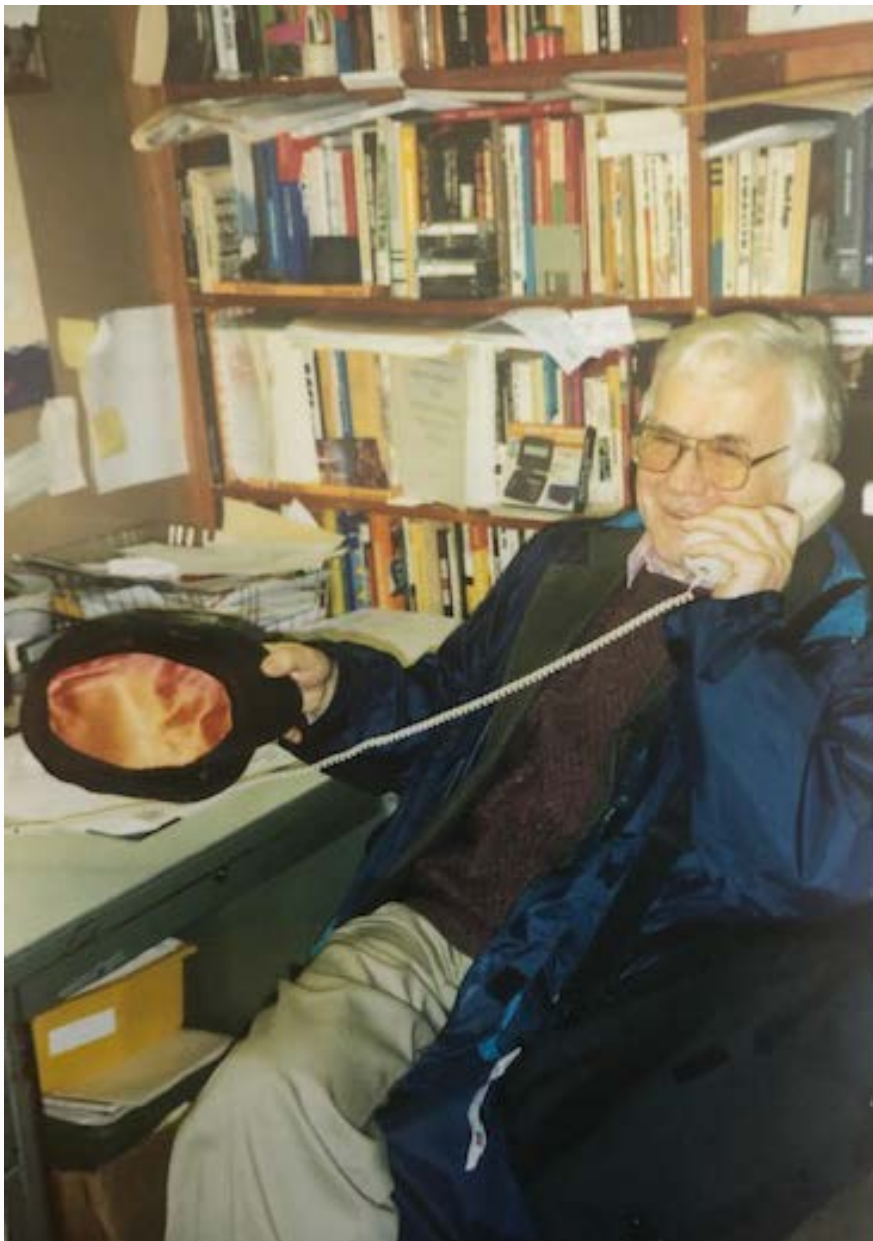
Sam championed his graduate students and continued to mentor us and collaborate long after our graduation and his retirement. When I began teaching sociology, Sam was my first guest lecturer. His book *Narrow Escapes: A Boy's Holocaust Memories and Their Legacy* (2000) would be the inspiration for my own course, "Narrating Genocide." Sam and Pearl Oliner were prolific writers and the scholarship they produced, especially in the field of Altruism and Compassion, is unparalleled. My own scholarship is heavily influenced by Sam, which is why I mention him in every invited lecture I give.

I owe a great deal to Sam, professionally and personally, which is why I am so proud to be working alongside my colleague, Dr. Ronnie Swartz, Director of the Altruistic Behavior Institute. We are keeping the conversations on altruism going and in making sure that Sam and Pearl's contributions remain accessible to folks around the world. Sam was an exceptional scholar and teacher. I loved him and my life has forever been changed because of him. May Sam and Pearl's memory be a blessing. And may the *Humboldt*

*Journal of Social Relations* and the Altruistic Behavior Institute continue to educate, inspire, and create community for another 50 years!

— MARAL N. ATTALLAH, M.A.

*Distinguished Lecturer,  
Department of Critical Race,  
Gender & Sexuality Studies,  
Cal Poly Humboldt  
BA and MA in Sociology (2005, 2007),  
Cal Poly Humboldt*



*Sam Oliner in Lower Library  
Office with beloved Greek  
sailor's cap (circa 2000)*