

12-1-1989

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Recommended Citation

D'Ambrosio, Ubiratan (1989) "The Visits of Hassler Whitney to Brazil: Hassler Whitney, In Memoriam," *Humanistic Mathematics Network Journal*: Iss. 4, Article 4.

Available at: <http://scholarship.claremont.edu/hmnj/vol1/iss4/4>

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The Visits of Hassler Whitney to Brazil Hassler Whitney, In Memoriam

by Ubiratan D'Ambrosio

Beginning in 1975, Hassler Whitney visited Brazil almost every year until 1985. Regularly, in April or May we would count on him for a months visit to Campinas.

In 1975 I was the Director of the Mathematics Institute of the State University of Campinas (UNICAMP) in Brazil. We had received a research grant which allowed us to invite foreign visitors. I was working in Geometric Measure Theory and was particularly interested in the late mathematical work of Hassler Whitney. But he was such a renowned mathematician that it was unlikely that he would accept an invitation to visit a new Mathematics Institute in a relatively small town in Brazil, invited by someone whom he did not know personally. With some hesitation, I dared write to him. The reply came promptly, very simple and sincere saying, to my surprise, that he was afraid he had not much to offer in Mathematics because since a few years back he had fully committed himself to Mathematics Education. Even though, he was ready to come if we would have interest in his kind of work.

By then we were beginning a major project in Math and Science Education, sponsored by the Organization of American States and I was also committing myself to Math Education. Whitney's letter was a pleasant surprise and I wrote back, inviting him as an OAS consultant. The visit of Hassler Whitney to the Math Education group would bring to our group, which was struggling for survival among hard core mathematicians, some respectability.

Indeed, he arrived and in his affable style got involved with our projects in Math Education, visited and lectured in elementary and secondary schools and to groups of school teachers and absorbed just about everything we were trying to do, always offering acute remarks and ideas for improvement. At the same time he agreed to offer a few lectures to the Mathematics Institute, more in the nature of mathematics, about his processes of creating mathematics and about history. Of Course, his presence in the Mathematics Institute was a source of excitement, but he was really more at ease among Math Educators, school teachers and children.

Of course, we reserved for him the best hotel in town. A few days later he moved to downtown, to a very simple hotel, and every year since he would return to the same hotel. He became known to the people in town, since

everyday, he was jogging in downtown Campinas. We would pick him up in the morning and he worked all day in his office. He was very excited about his "part B" as he used to call a set of notes he brought in. He became very excited about Benezet's paper. But he always preferred to visit schools. He was eager to see the schools, talk to teachers and children and to revise our work. He devoted himself to us. He would require practically nothing of the formalities we always have with visitors and insisted on being called Hass. It was very easy to please Hass with a regular family dinner and he loved to bring his violin and play a duo or a trio with my children before they would go to bed. Then amid good and varied conversation we would learn superb lessons of life, of love and of care for mankind. Several colleagues had the same experience and the return of Hass was always requested. He very easily accepted invitations to spend a few days in other small towns, lecturing and always visiting schools and talking with children and teachers.

To a number of Mathematics Educators in Brazil Hassler Whitney was a most influential figure. I personally owe him much of my views on Math Education. His first visit to Brazil and my first contact with Hass was when I had finished my first version of the Chapter on "Objectives and Goals for Mathematics Education", for ICME 3, in Karlsruhe. His reaction to my controversial position was highly positive. Our friendship and professional ties grew and a convergence of views on Math Education was for me reassuring and surely the best encouragement I received to develop what I later called "ethnomathematics". I was reassured of his support to these controversial ideas when in Helsinki he invited me to be a Vice-President of ICMI while he was the President. Our relations in the four years in the EC of ICMI were excellent, always very close to children and to school teachers. Besides his regular visits to Brazil we would meet in three or four occasions every year in different places. Those four years were for me a most rewarding and beautiful human and professional experience.

With Hassler Whitney I learned much about education, kindness and, above all, I experienced the company of someone that revealed, while rejecting pride and arrogance, the highest moral and intellectual standing.