

A LEVELLER LOVED

IN MEMORIAM: MAT NELSON

MAT NELSON – FORMER *LEVELLER* EDITOR AND CO-PRESIDENT OF CUPE 4600, CARLETON PHD CANDIDATE, OTTAWA ACTIVIST, FRIEND, AND COMRADE – DIED ON JANUARY 17, 2017, AT THE AGE OF 35, AFTER A LONG ILLNESS.

MAT WAS A LEVELLER. HE SAW WHAT NEEDED TEARING DOWN AND WHAT NEEDED BUILDING UP. HE SOUGHT TO BRING DOWN THE STRUCTURES THAT CAST DARK SHADOWS ACROSS THIS WORLD. HE FOUND THE ROOTS BENEATH THE MUCK OF AGES AND BEGAN NURTURING THEM TO THE SURFACE, TO BLOOM AND LIVE FREE.

IN THE FOLLOWING REFLECTIONS, FORMER *LEVELLER* EDITORS PAY TRIBUTE TO A MAN WHO ENLIGHTENED, ENTERTAINED, AND ENERGIZED US.

DOUG NESBITT

I met Mat a decade ago when he got involved in anti-war and socialist activism on campus. He wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty. Armed with a petition or a syllabus, Mat was an effective activist and educator. I remember when we'd petition for troops out of Afghanistan and have to deal with the little tinpot Tories running around campus. He'd disarm them with a grin and a laugh, and proceed to win over the audience gathered around for the impromptu debate.

It was in those sprawling, rollicking discussions at Mike's Place where you experienced how deeply passionate Mat was about learn-

ing. I once lent him a pamphlet on the NDP from a Marxist perspective. A few years later, I saw the pamphlet in his apartment, with at least two-thirds covered in highlighter. I asked him why so much highlighter, and he laughed. "Those are the important parts!"

When I moved to Kingston in 2009, we stayed in touch. Mat sending video clips from *Kids in the Hall* and other absurdist comedy sketch shows was a common treat.

When I moved back to Ottawa for a year of union organizing work, I got to spend more precious time with Mat. Only then did I come to really appreciate how important he was to my own education—that rich, informal, collective learning we did together outside the classroom.

We'd hang out at greasy spoons, or share

tises and historical events, and he responded with a rare and genuine patience and respect, which I often thought would distinguish him as a professor.

A passion for history, along with an abhorrence of war, violence, and oppression, came together in Mat's academic work as he parsed Canadian history to understand how race and racism took shape in our country. He was thoughtful about what it meant to be a white man in this endeavour, and his appreciation of the importance of social location was exemplified in the interest he took in his family background. He loved talking about what particular relatives in Canadian history had done and what his family's Quaker heritage meant. He spoke about it not with undiscerning pride, but with a measured assessment of

cigarettes and coffee if I was working in Centretown near his apartment. In between his goofy jokes and puns we would talk about what we could do to rebuild an Ottawa workers' movement, share our love for 1980s hardcore punk, and have long discussions about our formative years in the 1990s. Things would invariably descend into a back-and-forth of *Simpsons* and *Seinfeld* quotes.

I always loved how Mat got excited to talk about his doctoral work because we shared an odd passion for the history of class, race, and state formation in 19th-century Canada. He wanted us to write a People's History of Canada when we finally finished our degrees, and I hope to accomplish this one day.

Losing Mat is damn hard. I miss him a lot.

ERIN SEATTER

Mat's intellectual fervour didn't rest. A few years ago we went to Montreal's Osheaga music festival, and he brought a knapsack filled with books and articles. Astonished, I asked when he thought he was going to have a chance to read. Later he took to carrying a book by anarchist philosopher Peter Kropotkin in his pocket, ever ready to pull it out for a discussion of mutual aid.

At times, Mat was gregarious and silly. Full of jokes and pop culture quotes, he could work a crowd in a bar. But in other moments, Mat had a calming sense of stillness and capacity for reflection that riveted me. I peppered him with questions on academic trea-

SAMANTHA PONTING

I met Mat when we were members of the International Socialists and the Student Coalition Against War. It was the Bush era, and we were united in our vehement opposition to the imperialist wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Mat always looked back fondly on those times, and would reminisce about our occupation of the intersection of Sussex and Rideau and the "die-in" in front of the US Embassy.

Mat hated violence with every fibre of his being. He was disgusted by Islamophobia and the racist attack on civil liberties, as witnessed through the implementation of security certificates and the extradition order of Hassan Diab. He attended Hassan's hearings and wrote about them in the *Leveller*, letting the facts speak for themselves.

AJAY PARASRAM

I met Mat in an intellectual and activist space, a class called "Other Worlds, Other Globalizations" in 2006. I was not a particularly bright student, and listening to Mat's words about Foucault, Marx, and others whom I'd never heard of made my head spin. When I didn't understand what he was explaining, he'd steer the conversation towards something more immediately relatable: Slayer, *Seinfeld*, and *The Big Lebowski* more often than not.

We were classmates in study, friends in life, comrades in activism, co-conspirators in

He donned a picket sign well. He was proud of his high school days, when he joined striking teachers on the line, forced out by then-premier Mike Harris. He later hit the picket lines in defence of OC Transpo bus drivers, postal workers, and Carleton's campus security. When I started my master's at Carleton, Mat was president of our TA union, CUPE 4600. I asked, "How do I get involved?" He said, with that wacky smile of his, "Well, you should become a steward!" He facilitated my entry into union activism, as I imagine was the case for many others.

Mat loved nerding out on radical politics. Once, Doug Nesbitt submitted a piece to the *Leveller* on hockey and community power, and Mat lost his shit. In the editors' comments section, he wrote something like, "This is perfect. Dougie is amazing." While the reaction wasn't particularly useful in helping the team prepare the piece for publication, we laughed

independent journalism, and colleagues in academia at the boundaries of our student lives. I didn't realize until far too late that for Mat, it would be the boundary of life itself. It strikes me as profoundly unfair that Mat will not be "corrupting the youth" in the important years of struggle to come, but it would not be an exaggeration to say that his contributions exceed what many can achieve in fuller lifetimes.

Our conversations in the last few years reflected where we were both at—the painstaking tail end of our PhDs, which were both grounded in colonial histories that kept us reeling from the crucial points of oppressive

at Mat's enthusiasm.

Mat's fierce commitment to the working class gracefully aligned with his peaceful nature. He was kind, loving, and, as many have pointed out, absolutely hilarious. He loved to share comedy, always sending his friends YouTube clips. He knew we were living in an absurd world, and sometimes the theatrics of it all brought him bellows of laughter, from the character tropes on *Storage Wars* to the faulty logic of George Costanza.

He was incredibly humble for a man so brilliant, and he built connection with others effortlessly through his warm personality, openness, humour, and down-to-earth working-class swagger. Mat, your departure from this earth has left many of us heartbroken. You are so dearly loved, and we will honour you by embracing the beautiful struggle you've embodied.

continuity since the 19th century. He was always excited to deconstruct and never essentialized a single issue as many activists and scholars are inclined to do. He carried the burden of his genius with considerable grace, always generous, fiercely undisciplined, and brilliantly rhizomatic.

Mat wrote some of the finest investigative journalism pieces the *Leveller* has published, and lived a life of praxis. In closing, it seems appropriate to cite Marx's 11th thesis on Feuerbach, which aptly describes the Mat I miss: "Philosophers have hitherto only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it."

pecially valuable.

The importance of activism in Mat's intellectual work was clear in the very syntax of his thinking. You see it in videos of Mat speaking, where he starts off remarking that what he's saying is also being said by others. There's a humility there, but it's not just humility: it's a placing of himself inside of a movement of thinkers. His thoughts aren't his thoughts; they're thoughts he's carried for a while, in his mind and in his words; they began and they end as our thoughts, our shared thoughts of a better world.

His death is a loss not only because of what he brought to the world he lived in, but because of what he would have created in the future had he lived. He will be missed by a lot of people.

