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Bradley Roland Will: 1970 - 2006

Filmmaker hoped to change world

He grew up on the North Shore but spent his adulthood on the move as an activist for the poor and repressed

By Trevor Jensen, Tribune staff reporter. Tribune staff reporter Antonio Olivo contributed to this report

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Bradley Roland Will, who was slain while filming a demonstration in Mexico, spent his adult life as an activist for the poor and repressed after a boyhood in the affluent suburb of Kenilworth.

While holding his camera, Mr. Will, 36, was shot in the chest on Friday, Oct. 27, in Oaxaca. He had been in the region for the last month to document battles between striking teachers and others calling for the ouster of the state's governor. The fatal bullet was fired toward a group of demonstrators, witnesses said.

Mr. Will has quickly become a martyr for protesters, with several Day of the Dead shrines erected in his honor.

A 1988 graduate of New Trier High School, Mr. Will for the last decade had traveled throughout the U.S., Latin America and Europe on behalf of various causes, most under the general heading of the global justice movement, friends said. He had taken up documentary filmmaking in recent years, shooting for alternative media including IndyMedia in New York.

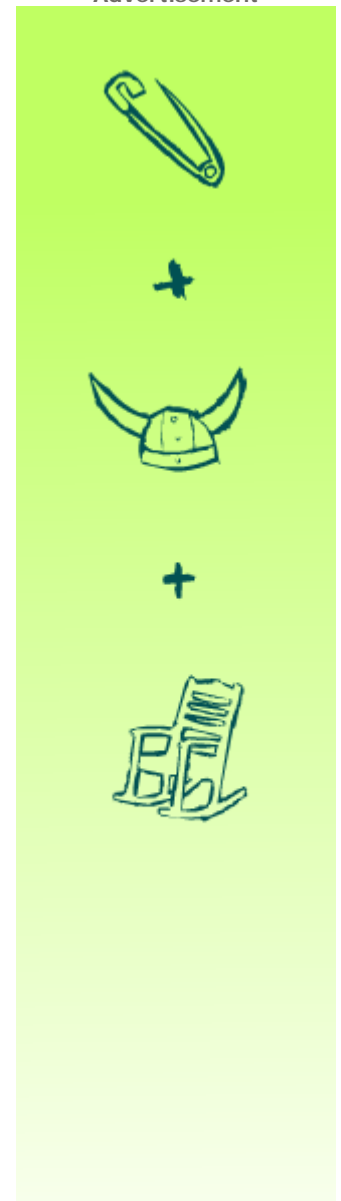
"Brad was where people who were poor or who had had their economies shattered were trying to change things," said Eric Laursen, a freelance journalist in New York. "He wanted to be there for two reasons: to document it and to support it."

A familiar presence at protests from Seattle to Miami, Mr. Will had been jailed several times. While not someone who "chased bullets," he had found himself in the middle of a number of dicey situations, most memorably in Brazil a couple of years ago while working on behalf of landless peasants, said a former roommate, Brandon Jourdan.

A resident of New York City, most recently the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn, Mr. Will lived a hand-to-mouth existence, staying with friends and sharing food and other necessities with his activist compatriots.

A vegetarian and yoga devotee, Mr. Will had taken up "freeganism," an effort to live outside the mainstream

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economic grid by means that include collecting and eating food discarded by stores and food manufacturers, friends said.

While he sometimes received plane tickets or other help from his family, Mr. Will supported himself by working sporadically as a stagehand and lighting technician in theaters and for parties. "Brad was always broke," said former girlfriend Dyan Neary.

His travel plans, especially in his earlier years of activism, often involved hopping a freight train.

"Brad was able to live on virtually no money," Laursen said

Mr. Will's father owned a small manufacturing plant in Rockford, said Mr. Will's older brother, Craig. Although Mr. Will argued over politics with his father and worried his mother, his parents came to respect him for the courage of his convictions, his brother said.

"Brad just always had a warm heart and cared about people, and that blossomed into a belief that you could change the world," Craig Will said.

At New Trier, Mr. Will did well in his classes and ran track but wasn't part of any particular crowd, said classmate Julia Lowder. "He was a pretty happy-go-lucky kid," Lowder said. "He never had that typical North Shore air about him in terms of clothes, cars, girls or money. He grew up pretty grounded."

At Allegheny College in Pennsylvania, where Mr. Will earned a degree in English, "He was into the Grateful Dead and the neo-hippie scene," said classmate Matt Felix, who lives in New York and continued to see Mr. Will throughout his life.

"He was really a workaholic; it just wasn't for things you get compensated for," Felix said. "He was just an enormously authentic person. I never considered [his activism] a phase."

After college Mr. Will moved to Boulder, Colo., where he became involved in environmental causes before moving to New York. He played the guitar well and wrote protest songs that he would sing at fundraisers and other get-togethers with like-minded friends.

Mr. Will was constantly on the move. His exposure to the extreme poverty in Latin America and elsewhere fueled his commitment to do what he could to help, Neary said.

"I think he understood that he did have a sort of obligation to promote social justice," Jourdan said. "You could grow up in a privileged background, but you couldn't hide from the world around you."

Survivors also include his parents, Howard and Kathleen, and two sisters, Wendy Mikavich and Christy.

Services will be private.

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