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### Camera his weapon vs. injustice

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When the bullets started to fly, New York photojournalist Bradley Will was clutching a camera, doing what he loved most - filming a group of downtrodden people fighting for respect in some forgotten corner of our world.

This was last Friday, on a narrow street on the outskirts of Oaxaca, Mexico, where Will, 36, a longtime member of New York's radical IndyMedia Center, had gone in early October to document an amazing story.

It is one our own national media somehow managed to ignore for five long months.

Since June, residents of the state of Oaxaca, Mexico's poorest region, have been in open yet relatively peaceful rebellion against the abuses of their governor, Ulises Ruiz.

Thousands of teachers have shut down all the public schools throughout the state. Their supporters in the student and trade union movements, numbering in the tens of thousands, occupied the grand old central plaza in the capital city.

The protesters chased Ruiz and his administration out of the state capital. They took over the radio and television stations and organized spontaneous so-called Oaxaca People's Assemblies in dozens of smaller towns across the state.

They vowed to keep up the protests until Ruiz, a leader of Mexico's corrupt Institutional Revolutionary Party, resigned.

Not since China's Tiananmen Square demonstrations in 1989 had a Third World nation witnessed such a massive and intractable public protest.

But you couldn't tell that by watching network news reports in this country or reading the national press. Here was Mexico, our next-door neighbor and one of the world's most populous nations, in the throes of a huge crisis, and the big American media paid no attention.

So Jenny Smith, Will's close friend for many years, wasn't surprised when she heard he was heading for Oaxaca.

Smith first met Will back in 1993, when she was 19 and they were both budding poets in Boulder, Colo., enrolled in something called the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics.

"Every issue that involved people being oppressed or needing help, Brad wanted to be there," Smith said yesterday. "He was just fearless."

For a few years, Will wandered the country, first as a tree-sitting environmental activist in the Pacific Northwest, then as a squatter and defender of community gardens on the lower East Side. At some point, he picked up a camera and turned to documentary films.

He took his camera to Ecuador and Brazil to do stories on peasants fighting to recover their land, and to Prague to chronicle protests against the World Trade Organization.

Wherever there was a cause the big commercial media ignored, Will headed there to tell the story.

"He went to places where popular movements were trying to create direct democracy," said Eric Laursen, another longtime friend. "Sometimes, he seemed to defy gravity."

There are more than a few in our modern media who desperately want to dismiss social activist-journalists such as Will, the same way that a hundred years ago others sought to discredit muckrakers like Ida Tarbell and Upton Sinclair.

Last Friday, Will was filming on the outskirts of Oaxaca in a place where no other American journalist had bothered to go.

His film, available on YouTube.com, shows a large red dump truck drive onto a narrow street. A few dozen protesters start throwing rocks at the men in the truck, who are supporters of the government.

Suddenly, men in plainclothes from the truck begin to fire guns. The crowd retreats. Another shot is fired and Will is heard crying out.

His camera, still running, falls to the ground. Will, shot in the stomach, would die minutes later.

Initial press reports in this country claimed he died in a crossfire. His 80-second film clip, however, shows no crossfire. All the shooting came from one side.

The next day, thousands of federal police moved in and retook the city's downtown in a show of force. Early this week, Oaxaca's governor refused a request by both houses of Mexico's congress for his resignation, so the crisis continues.

Maybe now it will get a little more attention.