

# I Went Blind at 20.

## Art Garfunkel

### Saved Me

SANFORD 'SANDY' GREENBERG WAS A COLLEGE FRESHMAN WHEN HE MET 'ARTHUR.' 61 YEARS LATER, GREENBERG TELLS THE STORY OF THE FUTURE MUSIC STAR'S EXTRAORDINARILY SELFLESS GIFT  
By SANDRA SOBIERAJ WESTFALL

**Enduring Bond**  
The friends reunited every month for years after college. "The bond has stayed so solid," says Sandy (bottom right with Art in the 1970s and inset in 2017).



When Sandy Greenberg and Art Garfunkel decided to room together in their sophomore year at Columbia University, it was Art's idea to make a pact. A "solemn covenant," as Sandy, now 79, remembers that 1959 promise to help if either fell on hard times. "If one was in extremis, the other would come to his rescue," says Sandy. Neither teen could have predicted that just two years later, Sandy would go blind after emergency surgery for long-undiagnosed glaucoma (see box). But as

FROM TOP: COURTESY SANFORD D. GREENBERG; MIKE MORRIS

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the scholarship student lay despairing at his parents' house in Buffalo, convinced he'd never make it through Columbia without sight, Art arrived to live up to that promise. "He flew in, turned me around and said, 'I will help you.'"

In his new memoir *Hello Darkness, My Old Friend* Sandy writes in loving detail of how Art—years before he and high school pal Paul Simon became the hit-making duo Simon & Garfunkel—devoted himself to being his friend's eyes. "It lifted me out of the grave," says Sandy. In the process of reading to Sandy, walking him to class, bandaging cuts when he banged into things and even filling out his grad-school applications ("Arthur's writing hand almost melted," Sandy writes), Art sometimes called himself Darkness. "He divorced himself from the life he'd been living, altering his own ways to conform better to mine," says Sandy. "Arthur would walk in and say, 'Sanford, Darkness is going to read you *The Iliad*.'" Art, now 78, remembers it as his way of staying close. "I was saying, I want to be together where you are, in the black."



**Sandy, who went on to establish himself as a philanthropist, well-connected public servant (Al Gore and Ruth Bader Ginsburg are close friends) and inventor, says he's spent the intervening decades weighed down by "a debt that cannot be paid because it stands outside of measure." He's tried. In 1964, when Art ditched architecture school and needed \$400 to make his first real record with Paul Simon (*Wednesday Morning, 3 A.M.*, which featured the single "The Sound of Silence"), Sandy wrote the check against his \$404 bank balance. But Art sees a clean balance sheet. With Sandy "my real life emerged," he says. "I became a better guy in my own eyes and began to see who I was—somebody who gives to a friend."**

As for Sandy, he refuses to this day to be "the blind guy," although his vision is "zero, zero. I see nothing," he says. A father of three and grandfather of four, he will not use a guide dog or cane. He wears glasses ("to fool people," says Art) and mastered braille in four days but prefers to read with the speech-compression machine he invented and patented in 1969, which speeds up audio recordings without distorting sound, allowing him to absorb more information in less time. "I wanted to be Sandy Greenberg the human being. Just like everybody has their deficiencies and difficulties, so do I—blindness," he says.

In 2012 he and his wife, Sue, a teacher and White House aide to President Clinton in the



### Navigating Life Together

The pair (right, at Columbia in 2018) re-created for *National Geographic* in 2016 Sandy's first blind solo trip on the N.Y.C. subway in 1962, with Art (above right) secretly trailing him. "It was the worst couple of hours in my life," says Sandy. "But Arthur knew it was only when I could prove to myself I could do it that I would have real independence."



'Was I a fool for this friendship? I take the leap of faith when I feel it—and there he was'

—ART GARFUNKEL

1990s, created the End Blindness by 2020 prize, now \$3 million, for a vision-restoring breakthrough. Though the prize remains unclaimed, his ophthalmologist Dr. Harry Quigley of the Johns Hopkins Wilmer Eye Institute says Sandy's advocacy has made strides big and small against eye disease. Embryonic-stem-cell research promises "we'll be able to restore vision within the next 20 years," says Quigley. "In the meantime, when I talk to patients who've lost their vision and think their life is over, I say, 'Let me tell you about a guy named Sandy...'" ●

### The Disease That Blinded Him

Glaucoma—damage to the optic nerve caused by a buildup of fluid pressure in the eye—is most common in older adults but can affect the young as well. It's usually treatable with drops or surgery, but Greenberg's symptoms, including a sudden cloudiness to his vision that steadily worsened, were misdiagnosed until it was too late to save his optic nerve. The Wilmer Eye Institute's Dr. Harry Quigley says anyone at high risk—those with family history of glaucoma; people of Asian or African ancestry; those who need extremely thick eyeglasses—should get a specialized annual exam starting in their 20s. Everyone, by their 40s and 50s, should have an annual exam.

For more go to: [www.nei.nih.gov/learn-about-eye-health](http://www.nei.nih.gov/learn-about-eye-health)