

WHY PHOTOGRAPHY

Michael Kamber

I grew up in a time, in the 1960s and 70s, when photographs made a difference. My family got *The Portland Press Herald* every morning. There was always a black-and-white news image on the front page.

This photo was a representation of an important event in the world from the previous day. Weekly news magazines, such as *Time* and *Newsweek*, were packed with photos too; I pored over them eagerly, occasionally cutting photos from their pages. They were my only links to far-off happenings in a distant world.

The iconic photos of the civil rights movement in particular were burned into my consciousness. I studied the defiant marchers, snarling dogs, and pot-bellied Southern sheriffs with insouciant grins. Pictures from the Vietnam War changed my consciousness as well. We watched grainy clips on TV every evening. Yet it was the photos, rather than the news footage, that seared the deepest. I remember the photos and the photographers: Larry Burrow's color work from the field of battle, exhausted men and blood-stained bandages against the brown earth; Henri Huet, a French-Vietnamese Associated Press photographer, took pictures with the eye of a poet; the classic images that I would see again and again in my youth: Eddie Adams' Saigon execution photo; Nick Ut's picture of the napalmed girl running down Highway One. These photos were credited with

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turning the American public against the war. These photos provided evidence of people's lives, their suffering, American foreign-policy failures; realities that needed to change.

Somewhere in the mid-1960s, my mother, Hannah Kamber, picked up a camera and began to freelance for the *Maine Times*. She maneuvered her way into Pineland, a state psychiatric hospital. Her photographic expose of people chained to the floor in pools of urine created public outrage. The Maine Legislature quickly voted in reforms.

My mother did a few more assignments for the paper and then flamed out as her drinking and drug use spiraled out of control. Yet her brief career was enough, at least for me. Her photos were like talismans. They showed what was and what needed to change, and though I've not seen them in years, I can describe their many details. And maybe those photographs were part of what was best about my mother. Strong and clear, her pictures told the stories that changed people's lives.

When I picked up a camera in my teens, I was immediately hooked. I had the sense that I could freeze time, give evidence of happenings, express my feelings.

I photographed voraciously. My pictures were mostly moody, dark black-and-white landscapes, influenced by Edward Weston, Paul Strand, and others. I thought that one day I would be a landscape photographer. Too timid to approach people, and with no clear pathway towards social documentary or photojournalism, I had not yet made a connection between the photos that so moved me as a child and a viable career.

Then, when I was 16, I moved to Asbury Park, New Jersey. The legendary former resort town was in terminal decay, trash blowing past the abandoned amusement parks where I had played during childhood visits. I went to work at my grandfather's store in time to witness the end of an era. From an impoverished immigrant family, Bob Kamber had only a fourth-grade education; he moved to Asbury Park in 1925 and opened a clothing shop not much wider than

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a closet. As Asbury Park boomed, he and his brother-in-law slowly made a go of it. Their earliest pictures show a tiny storefront. Leafing through the family album, you can see that every decade the store grew, until finally it filled a three-story brick building on the corner of Cookman Ave and Main Street.

My grandfather's model for success was simple: you put in a lot of time, you know your customers, you give a square deal. That was pretty much it. When he was well into his 80s, he routinely worked 60 hours a week.

Mostly I swept the store and ran pants up and down to the tailor shop. The top floor was like a mausoleum for clothes, with dust a quarter of an inch thick atop old mannequins and stacks of brightly colored pants left over from the "Tomorrow Shop," Bob and Irving's failed 1970s foray into contemporary fashion.

After 55 years in business, the shop closed soon after I got there. My grandfather was in his 80s and Asbury Park wanted the land for a bus station, and no one saw any use in fighting to keep alive a shop that was a relic from the 1920s. Soon after, a transmission shop owner on Asbury Avenue offered me a job and I began working after school, climbing down into a greasy pit to pull transmissions from cars.

The owner, a gnome-like man, knew little about transmissions, but he kept a pan full of metal shavings in the back room. We would do a small service on a customer's car and the boss would inevitably trot out the pan with metal shavings. "Your transmission is on its last legs," he'd say, explaining that the only way to avoid being stranded was to do a full \$300 rebuild. The trick frequently worked. I was astounded, yet the other workers told me this was standard operating procedure in many shops along the Jersey Shore.

The shop limped along; disorganized, filthy.

The workers occasionally dropped a nut into the two inches of grease, and mud into the pit where we worked, and where I once even saw a live snake. This necessitated long walks to the parts store for a five-cent part. Wrenches could not be found and broken tools

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stripped bolt heads which then had to be drilled out. Jobs that should have taken 20 minutes took hours.

I quit and went down the street to A1 Transmission, run by Mr. Ed, a retired US Army command sergeant major. Mr. Ed was a stern but friendly African American, originally from South Carolina, and he ran a different kind of shop. If you were a minute late, you got docked an hour. Late twice in a week, you got sent home for the day. The shop was spotless; tools were kept on a board, each wrench carefully outlined in black marker. Nothing was lost, ever. Mr. Ed was honest with the customers and had great customer loyalty. And the shop was amazingly efficient—we were round-tripping transmissions in under an hour. I got paid by the transmission, and I began to make real money. I got my work ethic from my grandfather. I learned the importance of organization and structure from Mr. Ed.

On the weekends, I photographed. As I turned 18, I still harbored a vague dream of becoming a professional photographer.

My father knew two old photographers in Asbury Park, both bitter men. He took me to see them.

The verdict was unanimous. "You'll never be a photographer, it's a terrible profession, you work like a dog and nobody appreciates you. Don't even try."

I wasn't interested in much else, so I decided to skip college for the time being. Life became a pretty good party for the next year or so. I was making good money, getting drunk every night, racing my car, and occasionally seeing a pretty blonde waitress out on Route 35. The dream went south pretty quickly. (Later, I realized I'd been living a Bruce Springsteen saga, and they usually end sadly).

The waitress let me know she was seven months pregnant. My daughter, Sara, came into the world a month later. I slept on her grandmother's couch for six months, up all night taking care of my newborn daughter. The bills started to mount, winter set in, I moved into a basement. Each of my fellow mechanics—older men in their 40s, all heavy drinkers, men worn out by their lives—came to me in the quiet times, and confided. "I feel for you, Mike," one said. "I was

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gonna make something of myself, get out of this town, but I got my girlfriend pregnant, and here I am today."

I'd seen the larger world in those magazines when I was growing up, seen the wars and revolutions and movements. The one thing I'd always wanted to do was photography. I applied to art schools and ended up in New York City.

My savings from three years turning a wrench was gone in eight months. When the money was gone, my education was too.

Still, a year in school was extraordinary. I went to Parsons School of Design. My landscape photographer dreams slowly merged with my fascination with history and politics. I began to read *The Village Voice* and *The New York Times*. I became certain that documentary photography and photojournalism were to be my future. The path there was less clear.

I had a camera, but often lacked money for film. I had no dark-room access (this long pre-dated the digital era), my camera was sometimes broken, repairs were expensive. My classmates carried on at Parsons, which, even then, was around \$20,000 per year. A few were working class, but the vast majority came from wealthy families. The message seemed clear, and unfair. Education was for those who could afford it. I wrenched on the weekends in New Jersey, took the train down to see my daughter, began working construction.

I moved to the Bronx in 1986 and worked in a carpentry shop, photographing on the nights and weekends, when I had free time. *The Village Voice*, featured New York's best photojournalism then, and I would bring my pictures in each week for the near-certain rejection by the surly editor, Fred McDarrah, who had run the photo desk since the 1950s. I occasionally sold a picture to the *Associated Press* for \$25. Slowly, I began to get my work published. I was doing less carpentry and more freelance work. An editor at *The New York Times* saw my work and offered me a freelance spot in their rotation.

As I worked more and more in the field of photography, I realized that the years I had spent working with my hands-years I thought were to my detriment-gave me a real advantage over oth-

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er young photographers who had spent their lives in classrooms. I knew how to solve problems, to make things fit, to work out spatial equations and conundrums. And having spent years working on the streets, in transmission shops and on construction sites, I knew how to talk to people. And I'd learned a fair amount of Spanish, which would prove invaluable as I moved ahead.

Lacking a college education, I read everything I could get my hands on: the best of the new journalism from the 60s, Joan Didion and Tom Wolfe. And George Orwell's writings, the great works from Vietnam by Neil Sheehan, David Halberstam and Tim O'Brien. From reading *The Voice*, I learned about documentary film: the Maysles brothers, Frederick Wiseman, D.A. Pennebaker; and spent many hours in the dark at the Film Forum and the Thalia Theatre, learning how stories are constructed.

September 11 came and I quickly flew to Pakistan, traveling overland to Afghanistan, a disastrous foray that nearly got me killed, but one that taught me a great deal about foreign coverage. A year later, The New York Times offered me a spot in their West Africa Bureau. The original idea was that a reporter and myself would focus on the positive things happening in Africa, but the Bureau was located in the Ivory Coast, which was being rocked by civil war. Liberia, next door was also in a full-scale civil war. And violence wracked Nigeria and other countries in the region.

Almost by default, I began to photograph conflict. When I took a break from West Africa, *The Times* sent me to Baghdad.

War in Liberia was particularly gruesome, with child soldiers as young as eight or nine roaming the streets with Kalashnikovs. Random shelling of women and children was a daily occurrence, the results horrific. It was in Liberia in 2003, in a time and place before cell phones and without electricity, that I felt photojournalists made the greatest change. Working with a small group of photographers, including Chris Hondros and Martin Adler, both later killed in Libya and Somalia, respectively, I spent long days on the frontlines, or working among the tens of thousands of refugees sleeping in the

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streets and parks. The rebels had surrounded the city and rained shells down on the defenseless population. Our photos were published around the world and were, for a time, the only visual record of the slaughter of innocent people.

And our photos created change. They landed on front pages around the world; the United Nations met to discuss the crisis. In mere weeks, President Charles Taylor was forced from power, a group of Nigerian peacekeepers was dispatched, and peace was achieved. The cause and effect between photography and change was proven again.

On the quiet days in Liberia, I photographed with my old Hasselblad portrait camera, exposing large rolls of the 120mm film. I heard rumor of another photographer working with a thoroughly impractical Hasselblad, which seemed both bizarre and unlikely.

The year after the war ended, I went back and, in a steaming bar, was introduced to a tall British photographer named Tim Hetherington. Sure enough, he was the other guy shooting portraits on 120mm film in the midst of the war. We hit it off immediately, talking and laughing for hours and comparing notes on the war.

It turned out he had been with the rebels and had photographed the launching of some of the mortars of which the civilians of Monrovia and myself had been on the receiving end.

Tall and lean, with the looks of a movie star, Tim was wickedly funny and a great storyteller. He was also modest and self-effacing to a fault. He could write, shoot video and photograph, and do it all well.

When Tim covered a subject as a photographer, he read extensively on the history of the subject: politics, the social movements, the people involved. After the war, he moved to Liberia and lived in Monrovia while he worked on his book, *Long Story Bit by Bit: Liberia Retold*, certainly the most in-depth exploration of the Liberian conflict to date.

And Tim was doggedly attached to education. It was not until years later that I learned that he had gone to Oxford at the age of 17. I did know, however, that wherever he went in the world, Africa in

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particular, he worked with young photographers, giving them the training they needed, along with connections to editors and publishers. In later years, when I introduced Tim to young photojournalists, they invariably complained that Tim had taken such an interest in their work that they never got to learn about him.

I cycled between West Africa and Baghdad for the next few years. What I didn't realize then, but see now in retrospect, is that I was catching the end of a golden era in journalism. I had a front row seat to history, but also to the spectacle of newspapers closing down and laying off journalists with decades of experience.

Experienced photojournalists with contracts and staff jobs were replaced by freelancers, often paid a hundred dollars or less to risk their lives for a photo from a war zone.

The mentorships, the years working with older photographers who helped to train the next generation, were becoming scarce. I met 18-year-olds who bought plane tickets to Egypt, then hitchhiked across the border into Libya to cover the war with little more than a cell phone. Safety training, tourniquets, and flak jackets were out of the question for most of them.

Tim came to New York and lived with me for a while. Actually, he lived mostly with my daughter Sara, as I was overseas a good deal of the time. Our friendship grew and he became as close to me as a family member.

He had a great success in 2011. Tim's movie *Restrepo*, about the war in Afghanistan, was nominated for an Oscar. His book on Afghanistan, *Infidel*, sold well; he was courted by photo agencies, galleries, and publishers.

And the wars were getting more dangerous. The early days of getting caught in the crossfire were giving way to new militancies and dynamics: the journalists were now the target.

Tim and I had long talks about opening a center for documentary studies, where we could teach photography and journalism, particularly to young men and women who could not afford an expensive education.

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I had lived for many years in the Bronx and I found a long-abandoned building which I bought it with the money I had saved covering the Iraq War. The building sat on one of the most troubled streets in the South Bronx, America's poorest congressional district. Tim and I sat in the building's empty storefront one evening in early 2011, discussing the details of the center education, journalism training, exhibitions, loaner cameras. But there was one thing we did not have: money. We decided the center was beyond our means; it would have to wait a year or two.

A month later, Tim made dinner for me on a cool May evening. He was leaving for Libya the next morning. We had the same conversation we had had many times before: when was the right time to quit?

"Covering war is what I want to do," he told me. "It is the crux of everything I'm interested in."

A few days later, I was at Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, DC, with my friend, Joao Silva, another war photographer, who had recently lost his legs in Afghanistan, when I got the call that Tim had been killed by a mortar shell in Libya. Chris Hondros, another friend, who had helped me out many times in Liberia, was killed along with him.

The blow was crushing. Years later, I still have trouble discussing Tim without choking up. I was in somewhat of a fog, when our mutual friend, Jeremiah Zagar, called me. "You know what you have to do now?" he asked. "You have to open that documentary center that you and Tim talked about."

From a certain point of view, it made perfect sense. I had spent two decades in an industry and worked in dozens of countries, and I wanted to carry on Tim's legacy, as well as the legacy of my mother and many great journalists I had worked with and grown up with. To me, accurate and tenacious journalism is the foundation of our country's democracy, nothing less.

From a financial point of view, starting a nonprofit documentary center was lunacy. I had no experience in such a venture and

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no money; my finances consisted of a handful of nearly maxed-out credit cards.

What I did have was a great many close and supportive friends, a building, and a background in photography and construction. I knew how to build.

I rounded up friends and we set to work rehabbing the abandoned storefront. Students from the International Center of Photography helped out in droves, and I brought in Danielle Jackson, an experienced exhibition director. She worked alongside me to get the organization running.

Without the means to build a real gallery, we simply purchased a projector and began to screen documentary films on our back patio in the summer of 2011. We received Tim's blood soaked film from Libya, developed it, and mounted our inaugural exhibition in October 2011.

Six hundred people attended the opening, disproving what I had been told—that nobody would come to see documentary photography and journalism in the Bronx. Almost immediately, young photographers from the Bronx began to wander through the door. Edwin Torres was one of the first, a young man who had grown up in Hunts Point, a notorious Bronx neighborhood, then moved away for a college education and, eventually, an office job in Manhattan. Dave Delgado was next, also from a tough background. He had been on the wrong side of the law as a young man, then straightened out, raised a family, and now had an insatiable passion for photography. Rhynna Santos and others followed. The story was usually the same.

"I thought I was the only photographer in the Bronx," said Dave Delgado. "I go out and shoot on the weekends, but I didn't know there was anybody else in the Bronx who took photos or wanted to be a photographer." I quickly formed these photographers into a Friday night get together; then we formalized it as the Bronx Photo League. At the same time, neighborhood children were flocking to the center, partly drawn to the photography and film, and partly because they had found an oasis of safety and creativity in a neighbor-

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hood with few resources. There are only a handful of art and cultural centers in the Bronx, a woefully underserved borough. (The budget of every cultural institution in the Bronx, combined is a fraction of one midsized Manhattan museum-I know; I've run the numbers).

We soon began an afterschool program with seven students, then expanded it the next year, and the next. We teach the children photography and much more: rigorous critical thinking, media literacy, research skills, and the types of technical skills that employers demand. I always question why our tech companies are forced to import hi-tech workers from around the world to fill well-paying jobs. We have the talent at home. It is the training and education we lack.

The South Bronx has been a place where the population has traditionally been disempowered on several levels. By teaching our students to explore, photograph, and present the realities in their neighborhoods, we enable them to take control. The students see that where they point their cameras, and how they use them, makes a difference in the public's perception of the Bronx. They begin to control the narrative of their community. Our teenagers print their photos and return to give them to their subjects, creating an important community interaction.

They also exhibit the photos and publish them in the press-in 2016, *The New York Times* and several local newspapers published our students' work from the Bronx. Poor children, nearly all African American and Latino, are greatly empowered through this process.

Our investments in education have taken years to bear fruit. Education takes time, especially with the adult students who work full-time jobs and raise families on top of everything they do here. But the successes have come. Edwin Torres works regularly for newspapers and magazines all over the world. Perhaps more importantly, he has moved back to the Bronx, reversing the "brain drain" that plagues the borough. Dave Delgado is a regular freelancer at *The New York Times*; Melissa Elian was just accepted to the prestigious Columbia Journalism School, Edwin Torres quit his insurance job, moved back to the Bronx and is working as a staff photographer

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for the New York City Mayor's Office. There are others. A prominent photo editor recently called our after school program, "the best photography I have ever seen by students." In 2016, we were selected to represent the United States in a prestigious photo festival in Japan—children from the South Bronx traveling around the world to represent the United States. Some of our students are going into their fourth year studying with us; we believe they will be amongst the finest student journalists in America by the time they go to college.

The book *Once in a Great City*, about Detroit, traces the creation of Motown and modern American music. Three simple and inexpensive factors created the Petri dish that bore extraordinary results: educators ready to train young minds; a supportive school system that provided the structure to learn and work together; and access to cheap instruments through Detroit's music stores. None of this was expensive, but the results have changed America.

This is one of our blueprints. Slowly, we are adding resources, with dozens of cameras and lenses available to our members and students. With Tim Hetherington's books, we have created one of the finest photographic libraries in the United States, one of very few that is free and open to the public. A darkroom and digital print lab have yielded further learning opportunities.

Lectures and slideshows by photographers and filmmakers from around the world have born extraordinary fruit as well. In five years, we have become a bedrock in the community and a national leader in photographic education in low income communities. We are carrying on Tim Hetherington's legacy, and the legacy of so many others.

With my journalistic background, I'm a believer in journalism and photojournalism as a means of evidence, of educating the public, of establishing facts upon which the public can build through debate and discussion. For me, the real conversation that needs to be had in America is this fact-based conversation. It seems pretty simple, but it's something we're seeing less and less of lately.

The most important thing is to get the facts right: that's what good journalists do and that's our guiding ethos at the BOC. On a

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second level, I covered conflicts for over a decade. I've lost many friends around the world to violence. Now I'm back in my own country, in my own neighborhood, where the level of violence is far too high. I'm exploring and trying to help stop violence in all its forms. Part of what we're doing at the BOC is helping to prevent violence by spreading knowledge and strengthening communities. Photography helps.