

# **BRINGING THE ELECTION HOME**

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## **ANALYSIS: HOW MAJOR PHOTOGRAPHIC PROJECTS MOVE THROUGH NEWSROOMS**

### **Introduction**

Newspaper photographers often feel marginalized within a newsroom, though their work fills the same space, addresses the same issues, and adheres to the same rigorous journalistic principals as its written counterparts. For some, the perception is that photography is a service, not a craft, or that it's a means of illustrating a story rather than a platform for storytelling in and of itself.

With shrinking newsrooms, scheduling is less flexible, and this creates a tension between editors and photographers as the demands on time and resources are more pronounced. In addition, the structure of some larger newsrooms makes the recognition of photographer-generated ideas difficult. How can photographers position themselves to get their stories and images to lead coverage in the newsroom? What is the path to success for major photographic projects?

This paper will examine strategies for the success of some of the most powerful projects in the last few years. Interviewed are: Mona Reeder of the Dallas

Morning News, a finalist for the 2008 Pulitzer Prize for her project *The Bottom Line*, which examined how many Texans are at significant disadvantages compared with national averages; Barbara Davidson of the Los Angeles Times, a 2011 Pulitzer winner for her project about the innocent victims of gang violence, called *Caught in the Crossfire*; 2008 Pulitzer Prize winner Preston Gannaway of the Concord Monitor for *Remember Me*, a story about a mother's terminal illness and the family she leaves behind; Craig Walker of the Denver Post for his 2010 Pulitzer Prize-winning story *Ian Fisher, an American Soldier*, which follows a young man who joins the Army at the apex of the insurgency and watches him as he grows up; and Ross Taylor's *A Chance in Hell* at The Virginian-Pilot, a story of a combat hospital in Kandahar, Afghanistan and the grave injuries the medical personnel there deal with on a daily basis.

## **1. Where Ideas Come From**

For many photographers, ideas for major projects came from the interaction with the community through daily assignments. Photographers, more so than many reporters, spend most of their time on the street, covering various topics and developing face-to-face relationships with a cross section of the community. For this reason, they can identify emerging themes in daily coverage. In the case of Barbara Davidson's *Crossfire*, an investigation into Los Angeles gang violence and its victims for the Los Angeles Times, the idea emerged from a series of

inter-related assignments. Davidson photographed Rose Smith, a young woman paralyzed from the waist down from a gang-related gunfight on her street. After the story ran, Davidson maintained her relationship with Smith, and when, seven months later, she was assigned a high-profile story about Jamiel Shaw, who was shot and killed while his mother served in Iraq, she noticed a pattern.

For Mona Reeder of the Dallas Morning News, the genesis of her project *Bottom Line* came after a story about homelessness fell flat after publication. Reeder was concerned with the lack of public response, and she reached out to one of her contacts, a social worker. “He handed me this piece of paper and said, ‘Well, take a look at this! It’s not just the homeless, we can’t get people to care about anything in Texas.’” The paper was a list of where Texas ranked nationally on a number of social issues. “I was stunned,” Reeder said. “I had never seen it altogether like that. I thought, ‘Oh my god that’s it! It needs to be published altogether for the greatest impact.’ Surely people can’t ignore this when they see it all together like this.”

The idea for Preston Gannaway’s *Remember Me* came from a friend of the subject, who approached reporter Chelsea Conaboy about Carolynne and Rich St. Pierre and their children, who were dealing with Carolynne’s terminal cancer. The vision for the story was relatively fluid. With the support of their editors, Gannaway and Conaboy would follow the story of Carolynne’s illness, her treatment and the effects on her husband and family as her condition worsened.

The initial pitch was for a feature story on a young couple dealing with terminal cancer. Gannaway recalls:

They knew Carolynne's cancer was terminal, and their youngest kid was 4 at the time, and I think they were really afraid that EJ, the youngest one, wouldn't remember Carolynne when she was gone. And so the original agreement was that we would give Rich all the pictures, and he would have it all stored so that after Carolynne was gone, he would have this documented.

The Concord Monitor, with its small photo staff of five -- an editor, three photographers and an intern -- had a precedent of photographers working on feature stories for months, so it was normal for Gannaway to take on this kind of project. "Dan (Habib, the editor) always really encouraged us to have at least one if not two projects going at all times," recalls Gannaway. "He really pushed narrative photojournalism. So he would make sure that we all had a story and the reason why I got this one was it was just my turn for a story. It was luck of the draw."

After a trip to Iraq in 2010, Ross Taylor knew he wanted to work on an overseas military story and bring to bear the lessons he learned from that initial trip. He set his sights on Afghanistan and explored various embeds that would resonate for the readers of The Virginian-Pilot in Norfolk, Va. He and reporter Corinne Reilly approached a number of potential subjects, but Taylor was methodical in his

intent to create an opportunity for strong visual storytelling, and settled on the combat hospital. For Taylor, the initial task was creating a reporting opportunity where he knew he could take compelling images, and then let the stories and subjects define the project's scope.

In the case of Craig Walker's *Ian Fisher: An American Soldier*, the original idea for the project -- a story following a young soldier through boot camp and combat and a return home -- came from a group of editors sitting at a bar after the 2007 State of the Union address. Tim Rasmussen recalls the evening: "President Bush was giving his address to explain the surge in Iraq, and at the time the war was going very poorly and nobody knew if this thing would work. One of the editors asked, "Who the hell would sign up now?" and the director of photography here was John Sutherland, and he came up and said 'You know, that's a great idea. Let's follow a kid from high school to a war zone and home.'"

At the Denver Post, photographers are expected to come up with story ideas, Rasmussen said:

A lot of the best parts of my career -- the best projects that we've worked on in the newsroom -- have almost always come from the photo department. This idea and many others . . . all came right out of photographers dreaming up ideas out of what they saw in the street, what they knew, what they were interested in, things they wanted to tackle.

For Rasmussen, Craig Walker, with his experience in Iraq and Afghanistan, was a natural fit for the story. “I felt he was kind of an untapped talent at The Post, and immediately Craig was on top for all of us. It was kind of perfect. At the time we didn’t even know how perfect the combination was.”

## **2. Self-motivation and Belief**

While a good idea in the hands of a talented photographer is the essential component of a successful story, not everyone in a newsroom will agree that the idea is as compelling as the photographer does. For a photo-driven story to succeed, the photographer must have a dogged determination that persists in the face of obstacles.

Editors are meant to be skeptical. Integral to journalism is a kind of push-pull dynamic, where a skilled editor makes the reporting process more rigorous by hitting hard with questions the reporter hasn’t considered. A reporter or photographer dedicated to telling a compelling and important story will welcome this debate. After all, these exchanges make our stories stronger, give them direction, and answer the questions of our readers. Most of the time, the tangible work of photography is done in the field, with a lone photographer in a corner immersed in the story. It is crucial for a photographer to step out of that experience and evaluate what happened, what they saw, and what their images mean. We should welcome conversations about our stories, because we want to make them better.

At times, though, input from an editor feels less like a challenging obstacle course and more like a brick wall. Stories or ideas are often dismissed entirely by editors who aren't convinced of their merits. When faced with these situations, devotion to the story and belief in yourself make the difference between frustration and good work. A photographer who isn't convinced of the integrity of a project won't fare well running the gauntlet of newsroom scrutiny, nor, perhaps, should they. A good story, whether it was embraced at the start of the process or lauded at the end, is still a good story. The photographer must decide which stories deserve this kind of devotion in the face of obstacles.

Tim Rasmussen recalls consistent opposition from some people in the newsroom while Craig Walker was reporting *Ian Fisher: An American Soldier*. The idea was not widely accepted, and, as the timeline of the project expanded, and reporters were assigned and then reassigned, it was sometimes a challenge to defend the project's importance. Rasmussen is reflective about the nature of the challenge. "Opposition is opposition, and it's not opposition. Newsrooms have to be filled with contrarians. They have to have people who are critical thinkers, who look at something critically and say 'this is the right path.'" Surprisingly, photographer Craig Walker wasn't present in the meetings where the validity of the story was questioned. Rasmussen says:

I don't believe in destroying hope. My role is to remove obstacles for photographers, to give them the equipment and the time they need to make great pictures and to challenge them and hold them accountable to

that challenge. If I give you everything you need, then it's your job to give us back great photography.

Walker remembers, "No one ever told me to stop, so I didn't." Hand in hand with Walker's commitment to reporting the story came a certain kind of insularity from the naysayers in the wider newsroom, which contributed to the success of the project.

Looking back on the process, Walker says now that the things that frustrated him the most in reporting turned out to be the elements that made the story great.

He remembers:

There were times when I doubted it would be published or not. . . but I always believed it was a good story. I would get frustrated about the things that made it a good story like him breaking up with a girlfriend . . . when he went to basic training and he started looking for a way out. [Those situations turned out to be] important to the story-- that whole struggle, the growing up and responsibility. It turned it into a story that anybody could relate to. A story about growing up.

Mona Reeder's *The Bottom Line* was initially rejected in an open brainstorming session in the newsroom, but she persisted over years to report it. The opposition was rooted in a belief that exploring the measures by which Texas failed was simply too negative. Reeder describes her experiencing pitching her



idea to the newsroom as a “humiliating smack-down.” Nevertheless, she pursued the project. She recalls:

I was gonna do it. I was convinced that this was a great project. I was completely convinced. And the more research I did, the more excited I became, and the more determined I was that I was gonna do it and show 'em all anyway. And I did.

Reeder pursued the project over a period of years, detoured periodically by other projects and major news events, including hurricane Katrina in 2005. She continued to pursue the project because of her deep commitment to the issues and her desire to present an under-reported reality of Texas to the readers of the Dallas Morning News.

*A Chance In Hell* was initially expected to yield a small handful of pictures for the daily paper, but Ross Taylor shot thousands and then toned hundreds of pictures because he believed the story he had was an important one. Before the trip, people around him tried to temper Taylor’s expectations. He recalls:

I kept hearing from all of my photojournalist friends - you know, you’re not going to get US service members. You’re not going to get names. They’re going to clamp down. So I went just thinking well, we’ll see what we can do. I think if we can get people to believe in us, we can get in there.

Taylor believed that, given the right situation, he could tell a story that no one had seen before.

Preston Gannaway's *Remember Me* was published as a series over time, so the opposition did not seem as concentrated. The Concord Monitor ran five different stories over a year and a half, and Gannaway and Conaboy would report and then come to a decision that something important had changed within the narrative, and then pitch another installment. The most challenging time for Gannaway was after the death of Carolynne St. Pierre, when she and Conaboy wanted to pursue the story, though they had outside pressure to end it. She recalls, the "pressure to stop is a little probably harsher. You know, after Carolynne died, Chelsea and I really wanted to keep working on it, and so it was hard to get time during that period." Other resistance to the story came from a handful of editors who questioned whether a story about a single family had broad enough reach to justify the amount of real estate it took in the paper.

Gannaway recalls:

It was a very personal story, just really just about one family. So the irony of that is after you know, the Pulitzer, you know, once the audience expanded, it was very personal. The themes that the story touched on were so universal that people really responded to it. But there was that little bit of resistance initially.

While Gannaway encountered the most pushback towards the end of her project, Barbara Davidson had to overcome obstacles during the proposal phase. At the beginning of *Caught in the Crossfire*, Barbara Davidson got feedback that continuing work on the story of Rose Smith might not be the best use of her time, as the paper had devoted a full page to the initial story. Davidson maintained a relationship with the young woman and continued reporting what she knew would eventually be a big story. Her initial proposal to her editors was met with a tepid response. Davidson recalls:

This is a big newspaper, and the standards in this department are very, very high, and it's difficult to get a story approved. It's just because they only want the best. The LA Times is very willing to spend resources on stories, but they really want those stories to be the best and perhaps ... my proposal wasn't effective enough.

Perhaps it was a bad time of the year. Perhaps there was a level of being desensitized by the issue.

After Davidson put in work to create images, the support of her department crystalized. In fact, the LA Times devoted seven pages to *Caught in the Crossfire* in the A section of the paper and the resources to produce a 30 minute documentary video. Throughout the process, internal motivation guided Davidson to tell stories of "the most vulnerable people caught up in conflicts."

“Whether an editor was interested or not, I was going to tell this story, even for myself,” Davidson says. “You know, I’m a documentary photographer. This is my vocation. This is my calling. This is why I do what I do. If I find a story that really resonates with me, I’m going to pursue it.”

In each of case, the photographer’s belief in the value of the story provided the drive to follow the idea, even if it wasn’t widely accepted at the start. Belief in a project is not the only variable in the process, but it is the key to its success.

### **3. Identifying Allies**

If you have a great idea, and you believe in your great idea, chances are that someone in your newsroom will support you behind the scenes. These people will rally around you and will encourage your project, help you find the time to pursue it, and go to bat for you when you must overcome skepticism about your story. Each of the projects explored here had allies in the newsroom, from within and outside the photo departments where the stories originated, who helped ensure publication.

A photo editor, and especially one with input in assignments, can be a powerful ally. Barbara Davidson credits the assignments editor for helping her get on the ground when the news of gang-related shootings broke. In this way, she supported not only the daily paper but also her project. She was able to meet new contacts, make compelling pictures and go deeper into the landscape of Los Angeles, in part because she had the support of her photo editors and of the

assignments editor, who was plugged into every story within the purview of the photo department. The photo editor Jeremiah Bogart would counsel Davidson on the day-to-day aspects of her reporting, looking at images as they came in and helping her identify new coverage opportunities. “He was always very encouraging to me. I would show him pictures. I would brainstorm with him. He kept me calm and on track, which I think was really important for me.” Later, photo editor Mary Cooney and then department head Colin Crawford would oversee the “big picture” of the project.

Preston Gannaway credits her editor Dan Habib as a strong ally, who set the expectation for long-form narrative in the photo department, and recognized the time commitment needed to tell good stories. “It was a very small operation, so Dan and I worked very closely and he coached me throughout the entire project,” Gannaway says. She described the project as her first experience with a profoundly intimate story, and turned to Habib with questions about the methodology of documentary photography. Gannaway reflects on her personal and professional development as a photographer during her time at the Concord Monitor. “I just would not be the journalist I am now if I hadn’t been in that nurturing environment.” In addition to Habib, Gannaway also enjoyed a close, collaborative relationship with the writer Chelsea Conaboy. “Chelsea and I worked very much as a team, and she and I were talking constantly about this. I mean we worked together.” Toward the end of the project, when Carolynne St.

Pierre died, Gannaway and Conaboy saw the value of continued coverage, and advocated for the chance to take their storytelling even further.

It may be that a person outside of the photo department is best-suited to shepherd a project through a newsroom. For his *A Chance in Hell* project, Ross Taylor worked closely with the military team and military editor Meredith Kruse in the planning stages of the project. At The Virginian-Pilot, the Military team is notoriously strong because so much of the local coverage in the paper involves the Navy's massive presence in the area. Taylor had worked with Kruse as the point person during his time in Iraq and felt that a project with her at the helm would be especially successful. For Taylor, working across departments made the most sense because of his experience in completing a similar project. "Each workplace has a different pathway, and understanding this would be one thing I would encourage," Taylor says. "If you don't know the pathways and you're quiet and you're shy, you're just going to become a bouncing buoy in the tide of the newsroom" Because so much of the success of the project hinged on the initial planning and buy-in for an expensive overseas trip, Taylor worked closely with the people outside of the photo department who had the ability to negotiate for the expense and then worked across departmental confines as the final product was edited and produced.

Mona Reeder didn't have support for her project until Leslie White, now the Director of Photography, took the position in 2006. They discussed the idea soon after Reeder began formulating it, but White, then an assignments editor, was not

in a position give Reeder the green light. Once she received the go-ahead to devote more time to the project, Reeder sought out photo editor Chris Wilkins.

She says of Wilkins:

He's an amazing editor of pictures. He was there to corral me; to keep me focused and to keep me on track with the schedule. It's such an unwieldily large project that you had to really be hyper-organized and hyper-vigilant about staying on track, and knowing what's important and what's superfluous, what you can do without.

#### **4. Showing Your Work**

In each of the projects examined here, a turning point occurred when images were presented. If you believe in an idea and in your ability to execute it, then the work will make the argument for you. Not everyone speaks a visual language or can imagine the possibilities of powerful images when a photographer makes a written pitch. The challenge is that, in most cases, you must produce work under the radar and then present it, which means working on a project without the guarantee that it will be published. Formulating a great idea, believing in your story and your abilities to execute it, and identifying allies in your newsroom, make it possible to create excellent work, even if you aren't sure yet of how it will be received.

Ross Taylor spent only 10 days shooting in the hospital in Kandahar, but the project ended up as a series over five days in the newspaper, and then published

as a special section later that year. Taylor came back from his trip knowing the quality and force of the content he and produced, and he got the message that the paper would have room for three or four pictures. “I remember thinking, ‘No, there’s no way that that can happen.’ ” So he started editing and toning pictures, then called a meeting for higher-level managers and editors. He remembers the process this way:

I like the art of problem-solving. So it doesn’t throw me. ... Our problem was that people didn’t understand what we had. We can tell them we’ve got good things. We can tell them what this is, but we’ve to figure out a way to get them to believe in it. So I thought, ‘Well, I’ve got to bang some pots.’ So if you walked into a newsroom banging pots, people will say, what the hell is Amanda doing banging pots? So I wanted to bang pots. So I set up a meeting. The more we showed, the more it grew. I remember thinking I’m surprised at how hard I’m having to fight for the content of my life, the project of my life.

For Taylor, though the process was challenging, what propelled his success at the end was the significance and quality of the story and passion to “bang pots” throughout the newsroom so that the work got attention. The ability to execute an idea and deliver exceptional images wasn’t enough; Taylor had to work to get those images seen, to show his work.



Support for the project turned around when Davidson brought in pictures to show to her editors, and the stories in her proposal came to life. She recalls:

When I brought them the photos, the proof was in the pudding. They could see, 'OK, she's not photographing gang members hanging out on a street corner. This is Melody Ross whose family came from Cambodia to escape the killing fields.' They could see. It wasn't just reading a page-long proposal about this project. They could see the pictures.

After Mona Reeder found space and support for her project in the opinion section of the paper, she and Chris Wilkins prepared a slideshow. They had been working under the radar, and felt it was time to show the work, to give the section editors a sense of the scope of the project. Reeder recalls that time:

We just kept it low-key and we worked all year under the radar until, you know, December. We went upstairs to the glass offices and I ran a slideshow of 100 black and white images with no audio, no music, no nothing. I made them sit through that slideshow. And I just answered questions as they had questions. And they were just completely blown away, and in love with the project.

Though some editors still opposed the project, Reeder cemented enough support for publication. After it garnered awards and attention, many of those with doubts congratulated Reeder and praised the project.

For Craig Walker, working under the radar and showing exceptional images as they were made proved a successful strategy. Rasmussen recalls, “whenever he made stellar benchmark images, I would print them and take them to the editor. I would show benchmarks. As he made some of the more incredible images I would take them and use them to keep people’s interest.” The project occurred over a period of turmoil in Denver, with both the competition from and eventual closing of the Rocky Mountain News, and the Democratic National Convention. Newsroom interest waned in the project over time, but Walker continued to work. Two reporters had been assigned and then taken off the project, and Walker and Rasmussen were still working to convince the city editors that the story was worth telling. The turning point in support came when Meghan Lyden pulled together 10 videos to show to Greg Moore, the editor of the paper. Even after the story ran, and many people were on board with the project, there were still some non-believers, as Rasmussen characterizes them -- up until the moment the story was awarded the Pulitzer in 2010.

## 5. Lessons Learned

While we might hope that the hardest part of a photographic project would be in the shooting, the real difficulties lie in navigating the variable interests and values of decision makers in the newsroom. The successful photojournalist will expect resistance and view it as a necessary part of the process, chose allies and keep working. Barbara Davidson, in reflecting on the lessons she's learned in pursuing projects throughout her career is instructive:

The moral of the story here is if you're a serious journalist, and you believe in your stories, you're going to do anything to make that happen.

Photojournalists need to empower themselves more. You're not a service department. You're not a service person. You're not there just to illustrate a reporter's story. You're there to create and find your own stories.