

Time, Patience, Technique and Trust:  
The Keys to Access and Portrayal of a Marginal Society

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ANALYSIS

Since the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, documentary photographers have photographed issues inside and outside of their society and ethnicity. Long-term projects require attention to several considerations related to the time required and the subject. Here is what one needs to know to do long-term visual documentation of marginalized societies, like veterans who have experienced homelessness. You will need a significant amount of time, a tremendous amount of patience, knowledge of photographic skills, and the ability to earn the trust of your subjects. To substantiate how this can be accomplished, professional photographers Stacy Pearsall, Robert Gumpert, and Sam Wolson were interviewed at length concerning their work with veterans, or people who are considered a marginal society such as homeless people. The photographers' input supports these keys to success when pursuing and portraying subjects in a marginal community.

**Time**

When photographing and interviewing a marginal society such as veterans who have experienced homelessness, it is important to note there are several time factors. First, there is the amount of time you will spend with each person. The professional photographers interviewed did not agree on this factor. While Stacy Pearsall shared that she might spend ten minutes with each person, Robert Gumpert said his time with each person ranged from a ten-second joke to a long

storytelling session. On the other hand, Sam Wolson spent three years photographing his subject, Shanon Fulcher.

The time frame allowed for each subject is direct correlation of the needs of the photographer, the project needs, and the stamina of the person they are photographing. The experience of the photographer, whether professional or rookie, will often determine the time needed to perform the task. It is essential for the photographer to have a sense of timeliness when photographing a veteran who has experienced homelessness. The vet may have a mental illness or a physical disability which would impair their ability to withstand long photo sessions. It is the responsibility of the photographer to recognize the signs of fatigue and frustration on the part of the subject and take a break or cut the session short.

Stacy Pearsall offers a one-time session in her work with the Veteran's Portrait Project where she photographs a different veteran about every ten minutes and rarely sees them again. In contrast, Wolson followed his subject, Shanon for three years shooting him in many walks of life. These are important decisions to make before the subject and photographer begin their collaborative work. Each professional photographer emphasized the importance of listening and taking the time to reach out to each person, to hear their story, and document it with the medium of photography.

## **Patience**

"Here today, and gone tomorrow," could summarize the plight of the veteran experiencing homelessness. Depending on where they are in their treatment or transition, the photographer might experience meeting a subject and setting an appointment for an interview and photo only to find the person could not be found at the agreed upon time. The veteran who is propelling himself/herself through a recovery process will perhaps be unreliable, therefore

influencing the photographer's work and challenging the photographer's patience. An enormous amount of patience is needed when the photographer thinks they have a great subject and the subject disappears. It is important to remember this is nothing personal. The photographer will need to consider the period of adjustment the veteran needs and move on positively.

Robert Gumpert addressed patience in his interview by discussing the recruiting of subjects for his 12-year project, "Take a Picture, Tell a Story." According to Gumpert, patience was needed at the beginning of his project. Gumpert's work for this project took place in California jails. While it wasn't like the subjects were going anywhere, they were suspicious of him and what he was doing. Some thought he was with the DA's office or the FBI, or that he was soliciting for a porn magazine or calendar. Gumpert shared that it took a lot of time and patience to overcome the stigma of what the prisoners thought he might be doing. He handled this situation by being honest, consistent, and letting his work speak for his authenticity. Once he had taken a few photos and shared them, other prisoners began to sign up. The prisoners who participated in Gumpert's project would tell the other prisoners that Gumpert was ok.

### **Equipment and the Experts Advice**

Photographers develop their own style of photographs by their needs, situation, client needs and personal preference. In photographing veterans and places of the marginal society, the photographers interviewed all took different approaches for various reasons.

Whether a photographer prefers a studio set up such as Stacy Pearsall, or a camera in-hand like Sam Wolson depends on their vision for their project. What works best for one photographer will not necessarily work for another. It is a decision that should be made by the photographer after accessing their goals of a project.

Stacy Pearsall prefers to work with a studio backdrop and professional studio lights for her photoshoots. This set-up works well for her because she always shoots the veterans inside in a small designated area at veteran hospitals across the nation. She brings her own equipment and has it streamlined the equipment to make set-up easy. This approach gives Pearsall the characteristic look of a clean background of white, gray or black.

Gumpert first worked in available light inside the prison using a wall for his backdrop. It has only been in his later work where the use of a backdrop is apparent. After 12 years of shooting, Gumpert has earned the trust of prisoners and wardens of jails and prisons and is allowed to use more extensive equipment on the scene. Gumpert was adamant concerning the subject of lighting when interviewed. He feels artificial lighting of his participants would diminish the lines on the faces and the weathered character of his subjects.

Wolson followed Shanon in his daily life both in outdoor environments and inside various venues. His work needed to employ the use of a handheld camera. The use of artificial lights and the baggage necessary for lighting equipment would have slowed Wolson down. That is not to say that he never used artificial lighting, but merely the series of photos where Shanon is on the move in his neighborhood or with his daughter would have been difficult using flash photography. It is hard to be the "fly on the wall" kind of photographer when using artificial lighting.

A photographer needs to experiment with the techniques that will best convey their story. There is no one solution for all photographers to follow. It is a preference, but the photographer needs to, if only for himself/herself, be able to justify their views.

A general consideration when working with veterans who are experiencing homelessness is their medical needs. Some veterans suffer from PTSD, and an artificial flash could cause them

to have flashbacks of unpleasant experiences. Other veterans are now diabetic or suffer from injuries to their eyes from various encounters in the military. Using an artificial flash might cause them physical or mental discomfort.

## **Building Trust**

Building trust with a community of people who are sometimes struggling to survive another day can be a challenge. While some people seem to have the "gift" of making friends, building relationships and earning trust, it doesn't mean they are the only ones who can achieve this skill. When meeting a person from a marginal society such as those experiencing homelessness for the first time, you may find they are concerned or apprehensive about the photographer. Look at it from their point of view. They have so little, and the photographer has that fancy expensive-looking camera and wants to take their photo. Wolson suggested to first offer a brief introduction of yourself so people will know who you are, and then turn your attention to them. Wolson continued to discuss the importance of not taking your camera the first time you will meet someone. When first meeting a person from an ostracized society a camera can be an intimidating instrument. If you must have your camera with you the first time, make it less conspicuous by putting it over your shoulder or tucked beside you if you are sitting.

Open-ended questions are the good "ice-breakers" and offer the subject the opportunity to open up without getting too personal. Most importantly, after you have asked the question, listen. When the subject begins to show trust, then and only then, can the questions get more personal. Otherwise, they become suspicious. Ask if you can meet up with them again some time. Most likely they will appreciate your interest and say, "Yes." The next time you meet, take your camera.

When Pearsall meets veterans for her sessions, she will often sit and talk to them for a few moments. Pearsall shared that she tends to be on a tight schedule for her photo sessions, yet if someone is opening up to her, or seems to need to tell her their story, she takes time to listen.

Beyond listening and showing an interest in the subjects, Gumpert builds trust by doing what he says he will do. For Gumpert, the photos session begins as a relationship. "Take a Picture, Tell a Story" begins as a collaboration between the photographer and the inmate. The agreement is, the prisoner will tell a story, and Gumpert will take their photo. Gumpert promises to return with a picture for the subject to keep, and he is faithful in doing so. Gumpert revealed in his interview that prisoners truly want a photo of themselves. According to Gumpert, the prisoners will post the picture in their cells or the photo provides the prisoner with a gift for a family member or friend. Other inmates see Gumpert following through on his promise, and they begin to trust him.

## **Conclusion**

Devoting time, patience, and building trust enables the photographer to break down barriers and to access a deeper understanding of the person living their life as a member of a disregarded. These aspects of time, patience and trust may come naturally for some, while others must strive to improve the skills necessary to gain access to the story of the individual. In time and with patience the skills become a part of the process and a more natural approach.

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