

A Day in the Life

A few years ago, I met Dick Lobo, a former vice president at NBC. Lobo had heard of my documentary work in Newtown, a small African-American community in Sarasota, FL, and wanted me to document a particular human-interest story for Tampa Bay's PBS station. The last thing he told me was, "This is expensive so make sure you have some shots lined up. We can't be walking around Newtown all day with a production crew." Nothing like a little pressure to add to the creative flow.

When I began to document Newtown, the first place I visited was a church, one of approximately 90 in this small African-American community. I felt that it would be a logical place to begin the story that would eventually unfold as the PBS documentary, *A Portrait of a Newtown*.

Two weeks prior to the PBS production, I had met Pastor Rojas at the AME Hurst Chapel, informing her that I wanted to take her portrait for the documentary. I had also met Esther, her assistant and the church organist. Since I was finishing my photo book, *The Face of Forgiveness*, I attended Pastor Rojas' church the next week with camera in tow. As I entered, a woman greeted me by my first name. I didn't recognize Esther in her Sunday best until she had introduced herself to me once again.

A lot of times I have a preconceived concept of how I'm going to shoot a portrait, but more often than not, I quickly abandon my best laid plans, embracing the relationship that is subtly developing between myself and my subject. I will never violate this newfound trust, nor will I ask my subject(s) to do something that I wouldn't do. It is never my intention to compromise the human condition, but to show enlightenment as well as pay homage to its strength and courage.

Welcome to Newtown

The day had finally arrived for the documentary, and a downpour meant there wouldn't be any shooting outside. What else could possibly go wrong? I had been miked at the chapel, but the office was in a separate building across the street. Running between the raindrops, I met Pastor Rojas at her office and saw Esther across from the pastor with tears running down her cheeks, eyes swollen, quietly sobbing in a chair. "Esther has backslid from crack and alcohol abuse," Pastor Rojas told me. I was witnessing a person unravel in front of me. However, the possibility of documenting her salvation and redemption in front

of a few million viewers crept into my mind and brought a ray of hope to the situation.

As I approached Esther, I realized her struggle could benefit many others in need. Up until this time, she had no idea that I was going to take her portrait. I explained why I initially hadn't mentioned it, but if she was willing to tell her story, would she let others witness her recovery? "Yes," she replied with a slight tremor in her voice.



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When I returned to the church, the producer and cameraman were dumbstruck. "You left your mike on," the producer said. They had heard everything. "Welcome to Newtown," I replied simply.

Fred's Fruit Stand

Miles away from Newtown, located on Bee Ridge Road leading into Sarasota, FL, I had always seen Fred Dula selling his fresh fruits and vegetables at the Yum Yum Tree. He tried to get the proper permits to set up a vegetable stand in his neighborhood, but was always denied. I ran into him a few days before the PBS shoot and told him what I wanted to photograph.

That late afternoon, with the humidity extremely high from the morning's rain and daylight still lingering, Fred and his impromptu vegetable stand appeared on the corner of Martin Luther King Boulevard and Washington Boulevard—all without the necessary permits.

Why this photograph? Nothing really special—lighting was



“It is often said that the eyes are the windows to the soul. I believe that the eyes are very important in my portraits, but they are no more than a reflection of that moment in time, the intimate dialogue created between the photographer and his subject, a gift that I constantly receive, but unfortunately I am never quite satisfied. When Imogene Cunningham was once asked, ‘What is your favorite photograph?’ She replied, ‘The one I take tomorrow.’ ”

I put the fruit down and embraced this burly man, saying, “Show me some love, Fred.” We both laughed, and I turned away into the darkness toward the comfort of my own home.

A few months later I drove back to the Yum Yum Tree to give Fred his portrait. “Where’s Fred?” I asked. “Mr. Katzman, Fred died last month,” replied Fred Junior. I just stood there, disbelief of the sudden news flashing across my face. Fred Junior told me how Fred Senior had passed and about his father’s dying wish and how his son promised he would fulfill it. “My dad was dying and he told everyone to leave the hospital room except me, and as I leaned over he said, ‘Fred, promise me you will find my family, find our family.’ ”

I just stood there, remembering our brief moment together, the scent of his fresh watermelon under the sweltering heat; his husky laugh. I was not only saddened for the family’s loss, but mine as well. I would never have an opportunity to shoot Fred Dula again as I had promised, or banter about local politics and the inequality that still exists in our world today.

I handed the portraits to Fred Junior while he continued to tell me about his quest. “I went on the computer, and looked for the family name, Dula. Ohio, North Carolina, nothing. There were no black Dulas, just white folks. And then I saw there was a Dula in Tampa—the last Dula on the list. I called him up. He was watchin’ TV and tellin’ me he saw a movie about a photographer, a white guy, taking a picture of a man who looked just like his father.”

Fred’s son managed to fulfill his father’s dying wish. As it turned out, both families had been going to the same farmers market in Tampa, every Saturday morning for the last 15 years. Fathers and sons—never crossing each other’s path.

Turning away from Fred, a chill running down my spine, I choked up, as I occasionally do when I relive this story. Welcome to Newtown. CC

Editor’s Note: Those wanting to see A Portrait of a Newtown can view this PBS documentary on Steven’s site, www.stevenkatzmanphotography.com. Click on Media, go to the Newtown Chapter and click on “Video.”

provided with an on-camera strobe; the high vantage point and fast shutter speed eliminated background distractions. During the break, we all enjoyed Fred’s watermelon, a little conversation, peppered with local politics, then back to that fresh watermelon. The PBS shoot was a wrap. As I began to purchase a few melons, Fred refused my money.

Steven Katzman, a self-taught photographer, established Steven Katzman Photography, LLC in 1990. His recent book is The Face of Forgiveness, Salvation and Redemption. Mr. Katzman has been on the faculty at the Ringling School of Art and Design since 2003. He is a Lexar Elite Photographer, a Gretag Influencer and is sponsored by Bogen Imaging. Visit his website: www.stevenkatzmanphotography.com