

## A Day in the Life—Part II

Throughout history, photographers have had the opportunity to change countless lives with their iconic images. In 1968, Eddie Adams' Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph of General Nguyễn Ngọc Loan executing Nguyễn Văn Lém put a face on the Vietnam War. During the 1870s, William Henry Jackson's photographs of the West led to the creation of America's first national park, Yellowstone National Park, and the foundation of today's park system.

But what about the work that countless photographers around the world create, be it documentary, commercial, fashion, wedding or portrait? And yes, art! What happens to the life of a photograph? Perhaps it is used in an ad campaign, placed in a wedding album or

register, the same one his father bought in 1953 when he first opened the station. Neither of us had the luxury of time and I knew it would be rather redundant to photograph his office with and without Lawrence. So, while I took his portrait, I noticed that he had pictures of his family pinned to the shelves. I hoped that his finished portrait would be pinned next to his family's collection.

Now I could concentrate on creating the panoramic of his office I originally visualized. While I was shooting left to right, Lawrence came in to take a break from the daily grind. We started sipping sodas, busting each other up with our dry sense of humor, while I tried to concentrate on the shoot. And then there was silence. He walked



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Lawrence Baker surrounded by family photos, including one of his grandson, who graduated first in his class at the University of South Florida Medical School.

even published in this magazine. Whether for an audience of one, or a nation of millions, photographers have the opportunity to make images that change lives, both others' and their own.

When I began documenting "A Portrait of Newtown," an African American community located in Sarasota, FL, I stumbled across a gas station that no longer sold gas. The pumps had been idle for a number of years, but that didn't stop Newtown's oldest business from servicing its residents' cars, inflating bicycle tires, or serving an ice cold soda to a parched throat. As I entered through the office door, I was immediately thrown back to the nostalgia of the 1950s.

I eventually received permission from the owner, Lawrence Baker, to shoot a panoramic of his office. My real intentions were to photograph this mechanic working under the hood, but "I have a lot of work to do," would always come as his reply. I knew that Lawrence had been going through chemotherapy and was struggling not only to fix the late model autos that would occupy his single stall garage, but also to maintain his dignity while doing so.

I continued pursuing his portrait, but he always avoided the commitment, until one day he was sitting in his office next to the cash

register. I wasn't about to ask him to move, so I included Lawrence in the scene. I knew something was seriously wrong, because of the prior information his sister shared with me about her brother, "Even as a child, Lawrence would always sit on the floor when he was scared."

That March, a series of photographs from "A Portrait of Newtown" were permanently installed at the North County Library. I had moved the opening date back because I wanted Lawrence to see the 40x90-inch print I had made of his office. During the installation, his niece introduced herself to me and said her uncle had passed away just last night. The humble man I had gotten so close to wouldn't be able to enjoy his portrait. I was devastated.

It just so happened that the *Sarasota Herald Tribune* and WWSB ABC Florida were documenting the exhibit. Upon getting the news, I immediately walked outside of the library to catch my breath. Upon my return, the camera crew from ABC asked if I wouldn't mind talking about Lawrence and what he and the community meant to me. I suddenly became the photo op. I got through the first question with

no problem. By the second I could hear my voice starting to quiver. By the third, my hand was covering my tearful eyes.

Afterward, my mind started to race. I wondered if, because Lawrence never saw his portrait, it would be possible to place it over his casket? I went to the funeral home to get the dimensions of his coffin. “We haven’t heard anything about Lawrence Baker,” replied the funeral director.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“Positive.”

I then went to the pool hall, a favorite hangout of Lawrence’s, and spoke to Pete, the owner. “Pete, I heard that Lawrence just passed.”

“Nope, he’s still alive,” Pete replied.

Sadly, Lawrence Baker did die shortly after seeing his photo exhibit. I was leaving the WPPI convention when I received a call from Lawrence’s sister informing me of his death.

Upon returning home, I printed a number of the images for his family’s wake. During the funeral, the portrait of Lawrence was on the right side of the casket, and the panoramic was on the left. Just as the casket was being closed, Lawrence’s sister shouted, “Wait! Can we put your photograph with Lawrence?” As I nodded yes, somewhat stunned by the question, I took the photograph and covered my friend’s torso, a gift never to see the light of day again.

At the graveside, Lawrence’s daughter clutched the portrait of her father along with the American flag she received because of Law-



More photos added, including Lawrence Baker’s last sitting.

“Are you sure?” I asked, incredulous.

“Yep, sometimes friends know more than family.”

I made one last stop to Lawrence’s sister’s house. As I got out of the car, she greeted me with a smile, telling me that Lawrence would do everything in his power to attend the opening that evening.

The good news was that there had been a misunderstanding with Lawrence’s niece. He was alive! The bad news was that the *Sarasota Herald* and WWSB were going to run the story of his passing. I was able to reach both newsrooms. “Kill the story!” Evidently, I looked pretty good fighting back the tears on TV so they ran it regardless of the truth.

That evening Lawrence arrived in a wheelchair, oxygen tank hooked to the back, fedora pulled to the side—a proud man celebrating his life, permanently installed at a library where African Americans weren’t allowed to enter until after 1957.

rence’s service in the Korean War. Taps were played as the casket was lowered, and I said “good-bye.”

Two years later, I visited the old gas station, now owned and managed by Lawrence’s sister. An assortment of candy replaces the fan belts, brake shoes and spark plugs. There are a few more family pictures, as well as a photo of Barack Obama. In place of the Tampa women’s football schedule is a portrait, framed by quarts of oil and license plates, of Lawrence, a man who may never know the impact his portrait—and more so his life—has had on myself and the people around him. OC

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