

RANGEFINDER

The Missouri Photo Workshop | September 23, 2020 | Volume 73, Issue 2



Jorge Borges, 75, has produced crops that are sold to public schools since moving to a landless people's settlement in Minas Gerais, Brazil, 22 years ago. He has been unable to plant and sell recently, as the region is in a drought and schools have been closed due to the pandemic.

Photo by Ana Caroline de Lima

MPW.67 alum WORKSHOP CHANGED MY LIFE

jasper doest

It's September 2015 when I arrived in Perryville, MO. The sun was out and there were a few days left before the start of MPW.67. As I enjoyed the late summer sun at Perryville's main square, I ordered another drink. In the distance I saw some of the other participants running around, hunting for possible stories. When I asked them why they were running around like this, they explained that MPW is a great opportunity to make a good impression to some of the leading editors in this business. I realized that this was not what I was there for.



A few months earlier a close friend of mine drowned on a scientific mission in Resolute Bay in the Canadian Arctic. Together with another Arctic explorer he was headed for Bathurst Island, a journey of 400km that was due to take around a month. They would walk and ski across a region known as the Last Ice Area, where summer sea ice is expected to be most resilient to climate change.



Photos by Jasper Doest

On 29 April, about 200km south of Bathurst Island, they encountered sea ice so unexpectedly thin that they fell through. Both died. The accident shocked the polar exploration and research community. I hit rock bottom when I heard the news and I remember writing editor Kathy Moran at National Geographic (with who I'd been in touch for several years) how my work felt useless. She told me that if I wanted to give meaning to my work, I needed to find my visual voice and work on my narrative skills. But how? Being self-taught, I had no formal education in photography. I had no clue what she was talking about. One morning a Facebook post caught my attention, which mentioned this social documentary photography workshop in small town Missouri. And even though it felt too far out of my comfort zone, as I would normally focus on photographing wildlife, I asked for Kathy's opinion. Her reply: "DO IT!"

The moment I stepped into the airplane to travel from the Netherlands to Missouri, I told myself I had nothing to lose. And didn't need to impress anyone. I

After years of working in cardiovascular research and running a bar in Perryville, Steve and Linda Svehla decided to dedicate their lives rescuing injured and abused animals.

went in with no expectations, with an open mind and an open heart. I was ready to deconstruct the photographer I had been and find a better version. To be clear, thus far my career hadn't been unsuccessful, with quite a few accolades on my resume. But I wanted my work to have a purpose. I found a story about a couple running an animal shelter "Rough Road Rescue," thinking that it would be nice for me to do a documentary story that would involve animals. Soon I'd discover the 'rough road' not only referred to the tough conditions the animals had faced throughout their lives; Steve and Linda also had their struggles in life. The first day I visited them, I told myself I would

try to connect as much as I could with Steve, who initially came across as thick-skinned. Despite the fact that Steve had warned me for the dogs' behavior towards strangers (as a result of their abused past), there was this great energy and I played with them all morning. That day, I didn't take a single photograph; I played and observed. I was excited to see the opportunities that would lie ahead of me. The next day I was all fired up. It would be a great day. I jumped in the car, turned up the volume and raced back to Steve and Linda while singing along with Eye of the Tiger on the radio. When I entered the dog kennel, hell broke loose. The dogs were nervous and I didn't

understand why. A large dog jumped at me, I lost my balance and one of my camera's broke. It was an absolute nightmare and I remember thinking "What's going on?"

As I sat with my faculty later that day, I told them how I failed. It felt like I had let them down. And when they started to analyze my way of thinking, something inside me cracked. I cried...heavy tears. During all the sobbing, I explained to my faculty how I felt there was this barrier between my subjects and myself. That I found it difficult to gain access. As I dried my tears, we decided I would go back to give it another try. Which I did. And that moment changed my life. The moment I stepped into the kennel, the dogs greeted me like we had been long lost friends. At first I didn't get it...why were things so different that morning?

What had changed? Then it struck me: I had changed. That afternoon I had cried heavily and by doing so, I had released myself from the pressure and stress that I had built up inside of me. I realized I had been in the way of myself this whole time. I wouldn't have been aware if I wouldn't have paid attention to the dogs' behavior.

In the end, "Rough Road Rescuers" wasn't so much about the animals themselves, but I recognized a narrative that focussed on Steve and Linda who jeopardized their own personal relationship to rescue these animals. The editors helped to change my way of thinking. I learned to understand the power of building a visual narrative and therefore I became a better photographer. But most of all I discovered, that in order to make a difference, I only need to be me, follow my curiosity, immerse myself in the story and my visual voice will float to the surface. It's crazy when you think of it. A Dutchman needed to travel all the way to Missouri to discover that he only needed to be himself; curious, with an open mind and open heart.

MEET THE PHOTOGRAPHERS



Tay Alexandra Radu
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia Kay Chin



Ana Caroline De Lima
Minas Gerais, Brazil



Andreea Campeanu
Cluj-Napoca, Romania



Anuj Arora
Delhi, India



Annie Burns Pieper
Montreal, Quebec, Canada



Austin Johnson
Kansas City, MO



Chris Day
Athens, OH



Felicia Chang
North Vancouver, Canada



Gabriela Bhaskar
New York, NY



Greg Clark
Miami, FL



Hailey Sadler
Gloucester, VA



Irynka Hromotska
Columbia, MO



James Wyatt
San Francisco, CA



Jimena Rodriguez
Cusco, Peru



Jon Dykstra
Maryville, MO



Mads Joakim Rimer Rasmussen
Copenhagen, Denmark



Tay Alexandra Radu
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia Kay Chin



Marjan Yazdi
Iran



Maryam Lerit Turaki
Abuja, Nigeria



Natosha Via
Louisville, KY



Paige Southwood
Bozeman, MT



Pamela Sherlock
New Prague, MN



Sarah Yenesel
Cape Girardeau, MO



Sofia Aldinio
South Portland, ME



Tyger Williams
Philadelphia, PA



Vipan Raj Singh
Srinagar, Kashmir, India



Yawen Wu
Saint Charles, IL

Lessons from Dennis Dimick's MPW Story A PITCH WITHOUT A PERSON

amy schaffer



Dennis Dimick at MPW.68 in Cuba, Mo., in 2016.

Photo by Marc Bernard

A 27-year-old Dennis Dimick walked the downtown of Sleeper, Mo., with his camera in hand and a vision for his Lebanon 1978 Missouri Photo Workshop story. After two years of having his application denied, he was excited to start making images. Now, almost half of a century later, he digitally scans the film from his workshop and thinks, "I'm not sure it was a story."

The MPW.30 participant had been trying to document the decline of small town downtowns due to large businesses moving into rural areas. Dimick photographed downtown

Sleeper for days, but even now, he accredits the story's failure to a lack of a central human subject.

"You're wanting to use your camera as a tool to create a series of pictures that helps people understand that there is a principle character," Dimick says. "The idea of trying to master it – that very simple concept of documenting a compelling character, overcoming obstacles to achieve a worthy outcome – that becomes a building block for much bigger things."

Dimick says this "epiphany" would have helped him when coming up

with a story to pitch to his faculty mentors at the time. Now that he has been a faculty member since 1995 himself, he wants his students to avoid the same mistake he made. He recalls a story that one of his MPW students in 2019 made about a jewelry store's last week in business.

"I mean, we're talking the last, final day," Dimick says "That was the personification of the idea I had been trying to do 40 years earlier. [...] I had identified an important issue, but I hadn't come to grips with how I could effectively tell that story when I was pitching."

If he could offer advice to MPW students today, it would be to find a character and not assume anything about them.

"Understanding the need for that kind of construct, even though mine didn't succeed, that most certainly was the lesson I learned," Dimick says. "I think that that's often what happens. It's not necessarily the lessons you learned from the workshop that occur that week, and they may synthesize in you weeks or months later when you realize what it was that you were trying to be exposed to."

MPW photographer Tristen Rouse on the pitch

FACING THE FIRST CHALLENGES

cianna morales

A story begins with a pitch, and a good pitch is the foundation for those 400 frames that follow.

Tristen Rouse, Missouri Photo Workshop alum, pitched and began one story before pivoting to plan B — an idea that he said his faculty initially liked better.

Rouse is in his first year of the master's program at the Missouri School of Journalism. Last year, he returned to Marshfield, Missouri to photograph the workshop, drawing on a classic MPW experience in a small town, while adhering to the new theme "Hometown Edition."

A photo editor and a documentary photographer, Rouse has a few ideas of what makes a good pitch.

The following interview has been edited for length.

CM: What was your experience of pitching?

TR: Stressful. The most stressful part of the workshop for me was finding and pitching the story. I spent my first Sunday, Monday just driving around and seeing where things were in town. I ended up actually pitching something that got approved, and then once I started working on it, I backed out of it and found something else.

CM: What was your first idea?

TR: It had to do with one of the homecoming candidates at the local high school. I started working on it, but at the high school, I was not very satisfied with the COVID precautions. Students were asked to wear masks, but there was not any enforcement. Suddenly I was in crowded hallways full of mostly maskless teenagers. And I left and called my faculty and said I can't go back.

I ended up swiveling to a plan B pitch that we had talked about, which I later found out my faculty liked better in the first place. So plan B was the better option. I pitched that formally Tuesday afternoon, got it approved and started working on it Tuesday night.

CM: And what was plan B?

TR: Plan B was a local woman Samantha Cox who started a mural painting business. She had started a new job in



the early part of 2020, and was not very far into it when COVID hit and she got furloughed. And she's got a husband and they had a young son at home. With all this stressful stuff going on, she turned back to painting, which had always been an old passion of hers. She decided to try her hand at being a professional muralist, and she worked on a really high-profile mural along the center strip of town.

So I was able to do a story on her as a muralist, as well as her taking care of her son. We framed the story as those being her two big passions in life: painting and her son Bowen.

CM: What are the elements of a successful pitch?

TR: The two biggest things are good character and good access. Telling the story in such a short amount of time with such a limited number of frames, it's really about finding a person who you can connect with.

You also need access. I volunteered at the MPW in Boonville, and I saw stories fall apart because you had a photographer get really, really invested in someone but that person wasn't willing to give them the access.

When I met Samantha, I was essentially like, "Here's what I'm in town looking for. Can I be with you for 18 hours a day?" And she was fine with that, she thought it was interesting and something nice to be a part of. Or at least I hope she did.



BIRTH OF A STORY

Each year dozens of photographers set out on a story hunt. Once they catch these stories, it is time for the pitch to faculty members, teams of professional documentary photographers who must accept the story idea before shooting can proceed. Scan the QR code here to watch the video from MPW.68.

