

Photographing Community: Wayne Lawrence

August 22, 2014

So many of us walk along in prison our whole lives, and some of us are lucky enough to find whatever it is that we need to get our freedom. For me photography has done that.”—Wayne Lawrence

When Wayne Lawrence spoke at the 2014 National Geographic Photography Seminar in January, he touched the audience with his honest story, striking portraits, and genuine spirit. His work is at once quiet and piercing, and once



Portrait of a girl at Orchard Beach in the Bronx, New York.

you’ve seen it you are introduced to a new community and maybe even new realizations about yourself Seminar emcee Vincent J. Musi introduced Lawrence with a few words about his book, *Orchard Beach: The Bronx Rivera*, likening it to a contemporary family photo album that is “staged in a living room built on water that gives, holds, and brings life together. Where no one is really at home, but in a place where they live—in their own skin, stripped of uniform—a narrative of love, family, and culture, without stereotype or judgement.” He concludes, “You can’t get there from here unless you know where you’re coming from.”

Something that Lawrence makes very clear is that he does know where he’s coming from. He’s continually reflecting on his past and reevaluating the purpose of his work. Lawrence completed his Orchard Beach project before he spoke at National Geographic, and since then he’s been busy working on new endeavors. “I went to the water after my brother’s death, and so somehow I found Orchard Beach, thankfully. But I’m done mourning. That was my medicine, being there at the beach. So I’m done, and now the journey continues,” he explains.

What has he been up to since then?

“I’m just celebrating life and living, and that’s what I want to portray wherever I go—It can be Soweto, it can be Rio de Janeiro—to show people with respect and dignity, especially people of color because I feel like you don’t really see much of that anywhere.”

It's All About the People: Framing the Human Story of Detroit

Todd James
April 15, 2015

If your portraits are not as good as Wayne Lawrence's, try this:

- Care about the person you are photographing as much as you care about your photograph of them.
- View every portrait as a collaboration.

The beauty of my job as a photo editor is that I learn something new with each story. Once in a while there is an aha moment that brings about a shift in the way I think about photography, like what it takes to make a really good portrait. I think the answer may be caring and trust.

When I look at Wayne Lawrence's portraits from the Detroit story in the May issue of the magazine, I don't need anyone to tell me that despite the city's ups and downs Detroiters are tough and proud. I can see it for myself—because Wayne saw that so clearly.

Sometimes you know exactly how you want to approach a story from the start. At other times, you get there by deciding what you don't want to do. With Detroit we knew what we wanted to avoid. Too many photographs and stories about Detroit have portrayed the city as a beautiful ruin or a real estate miracle. We wanted to avoid both extremes. But more than that we wanted to acknowledge that it is the people who give this city its character.

We wondered how the silent investors in the city's future—the ones who call Detroit home—viewed the changes going on around them. So we headed for the neighborhoods where they live.

A few years ago, at our annual photography seminar, Wayne showed his portraits from Orchard Beach. We were all very impressed with his work and with Wayne. There was an intimacy and honesty to his portraits that made all of the editors in the audience want to work with him.

Detroit offered us that chance. If Wayne could bring the sensibilities of his Orchard Beach work to our story it would match our desire to let Detroiters portray their city in Detroit style.

You can't really single out one thing that makes Wayne's Detroit portraits so appealing. It is not simply the fact that he used a bulky 4x5 camera that is slow, deliberate, and requires collaboration. Though that probably helps. It is not only that Wayne is respectful and humble. Though that probably helps too. It is not just that he is genuinely interested in the people he photographed and their stories. It is all those things and the trust they engender between Wayne and the people he portrays with his photographs. That trust makes all the difference in the world.



Morgan, his wife, Robin, and their children, Gary Effler and Kenneth D. and Korey Morgan, are renovating a duplex they bought on the East Side for \$1,800 plus back taxes.