

Chicago freelance music photographer captures arrest of NYC subway shooter

“We got him.” Those were the words of New York City Mayor Eric Adams on April 13 to announce the arrest of Frank James, the man suspected of shooting 10 people the day before on a subway train in Brooklyn. But they also could apply to Meredith Goldberg, the Chicago-based freelance photographer who made the picture of the arrest that ran on the front pages of several newspapers around the country.

Goldberg, who specializes in documenting punk rock shows, arrived in New York the day before to visit relatives. She said she was aware of the shooting and that the suspect was still on the loose but didn't think much about it.

“As soon as I got off the plane I had texts about the shooting and the next morning, my sister said ‘Be careful, he's still on the loose.’”

Goldberg was out capturing street scenes along St. Mark's Place in Manhattan's East Village neighborhood when she saw several police officers. “I didn't think they were going to grab lunch so I got my cameras out [a Canon 60d with a 85/1.8 prime lens and a Canon 90d with a 24/2.8 prime lens] and saw them handcuffing a guy. I took a few pictures of that and heard people saying ‘that's the guy, that's the guy!’” Then I asked a cop if it was the subway shooter and he said, ‘It sure looks like it.’”



(Photo courtesy of Alyssa Goldberg)

While Goldberg, 53, has spent the last two decades shooting punk rock shows at night and street scenes by day, she started out in news, attending the University of Missouri Journalism School and completing internships at the Flint Journal, Indianapolis Star and Troy Daily News in Ohio.

"I consider myself a photojournalist who shoots punk rock," Goldberg said, adding that before her picture of the James arrest, her most high-profile news shot was a February 2020 cover shot of two union workers for [In These Times](#) magazine.

She also said her encounter was more than just luck, citing a quote from Roman philosopher Seneca that she said several of her photographer mentors would often verbalize: "Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity."

Indeed, there are examples of photographers or videographers being at the right place at the right time –perhaps most famously when brothers Jules Clément Naudet and Thomas Gédéon Naudet were in New York on September 11, 2001, shooting a documentary on Engine 7 in Lower Manhattan when terrorists struck. The Naudet brothers had the sense to pivot and take the video that news outlets around the world continue to show to this day. Darnella Frazier, 17 at the time, filmed the murder of George Floyd in 2020.

“I feel that I was lucky that it happened right in front of me, but I was prepared by having the experience to know that if you see cops moving urgently towards something, you move towards them, even if you can’t see what’s going on at first,” Goldberg said.

Kevin Landwer-Johan, a Tampa, Florida-based [photojournalism professor](#) at the University of South Florida and freelance photographer, said it takes more than luck.

“Having a nose like she did to check things out, that was great,” Landwer-Johan said. “I harp on that with my students a lot. Be ready. If you’re a music photographer, that’s cool. But I don’t care if you’re a product photographer. Do you know how to use a camera and most importantly, do you have a nose for journalism and what makes a good picture story?”

Mark Dolan, a recently retired photojournalism professor who taught two decades at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University and Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, Illinois, said being curious is essential for all photographers.

“That’s a mantra for me in my classes,” Dolan said. “It’s also a hallmark of good photojournalism. You always have to be curious and aware. You have to be aware of what’s in front of you, what’s different. If you are in-tune, you’ll become aware of what’s going on because other people aren’t paying

attention.”

Dolan added that while it was good Goldberg had her professional cameras with her, in today's high technology world, it is more important that one is aware than equipped with professional gear because photographers can use their phones.

“The best camera to use is the one you have on you,” Dolan said. “And if you have a new iPhone with the three lenses, it's even preferable sometimes because when you have a real camera with big glass, you stand out. Emergency people will always try to pick you out and tell you that you can't do this when everyone else is doing it with iPhones or whatever their phone cameras are. Photography is not a crime, you can't stop me from taking pictures on public property, but when they're the ones holding the guns, it's not an easy argument to make.”

After capturing the photo of James being arrested, Goldberg said because she is from Chicago she thought of the Chicago Tribune first and contacted its photo desk. She then contacted the Associated Press – telling both media companies that she was experienced and studied at the University of Missouri.

Before the AP responded, Goldberg received an email from the Chicago Tribune reading “Hi Meredith, Probably would be most productive to contact the Associated Press in New York.”

She said she then heard from the AP and they took the picture, which ended up on front pages across the country.

Chicago Tribune photo editor Todd Panagopoulos said it wasn't obvious to a photo staff member at the paper that James, the suspect, had a Chicago connection.

“It turns out he did stay in Chicago at some point, but it's not what you would say is a Chicago-only story,” Panagopoulos said. “We pay AP to get things. In times of tight budgets, he made a decision,” Panagopoulos said, adding that he wished he

had been involved. "But, we may have come to the same decision where she should get more money from the AP and in that sense it's a win/win for everybody because I know I can't match what AP likely paid."

The Chicago Tribune ultimately ran a different picture of James on its front page, one taken later that day by a different AP photographer.

As for Goldberg, by the next day, she was already planning on taking more pictures of whatever she came across.

"You know what they say – yesterday's photo was yesterday, make a new one today," Goldberg said. "So, I'm going to grab my gear and head out."

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