

# Missouri Photo Workshop shows passion, compassion required to capture humanity

It was the end of a week that rocked the nation with reports of President Donald Trump's alleged shakedown of a foreign leader, prompting the president to [label the journalists who filed those reports](#) "animals" and "scum."

But in the small ([pop. 8,388](#)) Missouri town of Boonville, residents were mingling amicably with journalists who had spent the previous few days poking lenses into their stores, their fields, their barns and even their bedrooms.

In the seat of rural Cooper County, where three years ago Trump won 70 percent of the vote, there was no talk of politics. The topics of immediate concern were more existential.

The steel grey bristles of their buzz cuts almost touching, two men leaned over one of the hundreds of photographs laid out for examination on long folding tables.

"He died last spring," the one in denim overalls remarked, pointing to a detail in one color print.

The other man gazed silently at the small, smiling figure.

"Pretty soon, we'll all be gone," his companion added.

At the Laura Speed Elliott Middle School on Boonville's Main Street, where the [Missouri Photo Workshop](#) held its latest exhibition on a rainy Saturday, the air was both heavy and light with all-too-human moments like that.



The Missouri Photo Workshop exhibited the work of 39 photographers on Saturday, Sept. 28, 2019 at Laura Speed Elliot Middle School in Boonville, Mo. Photographers, workshop crew and Boonville residents gathered at the school to view the work created by workshop participants this week. (Photo courtesy of Emmalee Reed/Missourian)

Clifford Edom, a [photographer](#) on the faculty of the Missouri School of Journalism, launched the Photo Workshop in 1949. Every fall since then, the workshop directors invite top photographers from across the globe to descend on a small Missouri town for a week. Boonville hosted the workshop twice before this year – in 1953 and 1998. A picture from 21 years ago, on display with the rest of the historical photos in the school foyer, sparked the ruminations of the two men with grey buzz cuts.

In the school gym, festooned with blue and white posters encouraging the Boonville Pirates basketball team to “Work hard; Dream big,” a less elegiac crowd ogled the 2019 oeuvre. In the space of a week, each photographer was required to find a subject and tell a story. The goal: technical excellence

with a strong narrative arc. The pictures included shots of children frolicking in a bubble bath, a middle-aged couple reading in bed, and a teenager appearing to sob into one elbow as she held away a cell phone away in her other hand, vividly illustrating the other qualities required for the photojournalists to pull this off: patience, compassion and an ability to inspire trust.

As I inched my way across the polished wood of the gymnasium floor on my first-ever visit to a Missouri Photo Workshop, the power of this achievement filled my eyes and heart and mind. I took a job last year at the Missouri School of Journalism, in nearby Columbia, in part because it is in flyover country. After a long career as a political journalist, mostly in Washington, I felt called back to the grassroots.

It was impossible not to notice how different this was from the sort of crowd you'd see at an East Coast photo exhibit. No designer jeans here; instead, no-nonsense working dungarees. T-shirts advertised a local tractor pull and farm equipment stores. Fewer than one in five of Boonville's residents have a college degree; per capita income hovers just south of \$20,000.



Zhyaughn Bethea(cq), center, and his family look at the photographs made of him by MPW photographer Nina Riggio on Saturday, Sept. 28, 2019 at Laura Speed Elliot Middle School in Boonville, Mo. Throughout the week, Riggio photographed Bethea at home and school to document his life and personality. The Missouri Photo Workshop exhibited the work of 39 photographers on Saturday, Sept. 28, 2019 at Laura Speed Elliot Middle School in Boonville, Mo. Photographers, workshop crew and Boonville residents gathered at the school to view the work created by workshop participants this week. (Photo courtesy of Emmalee Reed/Missourian)

Still, it was humbling to contemplate the vast, impossible-to-enumerate wealth of this community and the enormous amount of human capital that goes into making it. One photo essay at this year's Missouri Photo Workshop depicted a woman entertaining neighbors at what appeared to be a senior center, then working in her colorful, zinnia-filled garden, then out tending to her livestock. Another told the story of a family whose dad has started doing the cooking and readying the kids for school so his wife can make the hour round-trip commute to a city job. Her income provides the extra money they need to

keep the family farm afloat.

For the photojournalists, the closing exhibition meant exposing their work to a different type of editor than most professionals are used to. The eyes that scrutinized these photos were not those of jaded critics: the grease-flecked hands in the extreme close up of the farmer working on his equipment belonged to someone they love.

“Excuse me, that photographer and that man are about to get to the pictures she took of him,” Torsten Kjellstrand said, interrupting a tour of the exhibit. “I have to go see his reaction.”

For Kjellstrand, one of this year’s workshop faculty members, that intimate relationship between journalist and subject is integral to the documentary process. Before joining the [faculty at the University of Oregon](#), he worked as a staff photographer for newspapers in Jasper, Indiana; Spokane Washington and Portland, Oregon. There’s nothing like running into one of your subjects in a supermarket and getting an earful, he said. Any journalist who has had that experience knows that it’s from such confrontations that trust grows.



Photographs from the 50th Missouri Photo Workshop are presented on Saturday, Sept. 28, 2019 at Laura Speed Elliot Middle School in Boonville, Mo. The Missouri Photo Workshop has visited Boonville twice before: in 1953 and in 1998. The Missouri Photo Workshop exhibited the work of 39 photographers on Saturday, Sept. 28, 2019 at Laura Speed Elliot Middle School in Boonville, Mo. Photographers, workshop crew and Boonville residents gathered at the school to view the work created by workshop participants this week. (Photo courtesy of Emmalee Reed/Missourian)

These confrontations are all too rare these days. In the post-Watergate era, the worst insult that could be hurled at a journalist was that he or she was “in bed with” a source. So, journalism became more transactional than personal. It’s easier to throw brickbats at a person you’ll never know than to navigate the ethical conflicts involved in having to print something less-than-flattering about someone you do.

Then came the digital disruption and the hollowing out of community newsrooms. In these financially straitened times, it’s cheaper to put a panel of pundits in a studio every night

to argue about the same old same old than it is to capture stories that will never go viral but will add deep meaning and trust to our civic dialogue.

I don't pretend to know for sure how we'll find our way back to the grit and the glory that's involved in telling stories that matter. But I do know some of us are trying. And, as the Missouri Photo Workshop demonstrates, this is a country with tremendous resources of good will and ingenuity.

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