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Learning Into Vision

By Amy Touchette | Photography By Desiree Rios

A promising photojournalist gains her footing

Eliseo, Ama's great grandson and the photographer's second cousin, places his hand on Ama's inside her home on November 5, 2018, in Fort Worth, Texas.



Ama plays video games on her iPad while her granddaughters, Bianca and Julianna, are occupied on their cell phones on March 19, 2019, in Fort Worth, Texas. Baby Eliseo sleeps in the arms of his mother, Bianca.

Fresh to the game, photojournalist and documentary photographer Desiree Rios has been out in the field covering news stories for only a couple of years, and she's already a regular contributor to *The New York Times*. While she's still learning the ebbs and flows of freelance life, her solid landing in the news industry has as much to do with her ability to professionally document a story as her ability to fuse it with her own vision.

It's an epiphany that's easy to dismiss because it seems contradictory, but for Rios, the awakening has proven key to her career. "The first thing one of my mentors, Darcy Padilla, told me was that I'd never be a good documentary photographer until I dropped the naïve notion that what I'm producing is objective," she says. Padilla explained to her, "You need to realize you have

a vision. You have an eye. Your work is very much subjective. It's now your responsibility to make sure your photographs are fair and accurate."

Freelancing During A Pandemic

At the time of this writing, Rios was covering the coronavirus in her home base of New York City. Rios, who was deemed an essential worker, said that editors have been looking out for the physical and mental health of their photographers, providing personal protective equipment, or PPE, and assigning work judiciously so that no one photographer is exposed too frequently both to the virus and the intensity of witnessing its effects.

The pandemic distinguishes itself from other news stories Rios has covered because "there's so much breaking news," she says. "It's happening so quickly, that's how assignments

are coming in, too. I get a phone call: 'We need you out tomorrow. Can you do this?'"

The timeline of pitching stories to publications has likewise accelerated. "We're learning what's happening when the publications are learning what's happening, so it's a more open and rapid communication. When there's not so much chaos going on, it's more formal."

Her coworkers have similarly banded together to support one another during this unprecedented time. "Even though we're all freelancers, a good group of us who are going out there frequently have been checking in with each other. A good friend of mine was able to get a few masks and other protective materials like gloves and stuff and just dropped off a bag, so we're all checking in with each other, making sure everyone is safe."

The matriarch of the family is Desiree Rios' grandmother, whom she calls "Ama" or "love." In this image, Ama poses for a portrait inside her home after receiving ashes on Ash Wednesday on March 6, 2019, in Fort Worth, Texas.

Discovering Photography's Impact

Developing close, supportive relationships like these has been a steady impulse from the beginning of Rios' exploration of photography. Part of what drove her to get an undergraduate degree in photojournalism at St. John's University was going out and photographing with her college roommates. While none of them took up photography as a career, Rios began studying the legends and was immediately hooked.

She was studying journalism at the time and started to feel compelled to include photography in some of her articles. "Like a lot of aspiring photojournalists, I knew I wanted to one day make an impact with my photos," so she switched majors during the second semester of her freshman year.

Establishing Relationships With Inspirational Photographers And Industry Pros

After graduating from St. John's, she applied to the MFA program at San Francisco Art Institute, in part because documentary photographer Padilla was teaching there. Rios was a big fan of her work, especially *Family Love*, Padilla's intimate, epic, 21-year portrayal of a family. Padilla was no longer teaching at SFAI by the time Rios enrolled, but she reached out to Padilla anyway and thus began a relationship that stands today.

"Darcy is one of those mentors who always keeps up with me. She is literally texting me with resources for freelancers now [in response to COVID-19]."

Also during her graduate studies, Rios met Leah Millis, a photojournalist who at the time was working for the *San Francisco Chronicle* and is now a staff



photographer for Reuters. Through her, Rios learned "all the [real-world] practices of photojournalism."

Millis also introduced her to Women Photograph, an initiative that seeks to elevate female visual journalists, the impact of which has been formidable, if not essential, to Rios' development.

Through Millis' urging, Rios applied to and was accepted into a workshop facilitated by Women Photograph, which included a portfolio

review. She had just moved back to New York City from the West Coast after completing graduate school, and the one-on-one, in-person meetings with photo editors proved indispensable. Many liked Rios' work and have been assigning her stories ever since. To date, in addition to her regular contribution to *The New York Times*, she has also worked for CNN, BuzzFeed News, Vox Media, *The Guardian* and elsewhere.



Eliseo sleeps in Ama's bed on Easter Sunday on April 1, 2018, in Fort Worth, Texas.

Shortly thereafter, she was accepted into Women Photograph's mentorship program, which pairs mentees with an editor and a working photographer. In Rios' case, that was Nicole Frugé, the deputy director of photography at the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and Brooklyn-based documentary photographer Natalie Keyssar, both of whom "were amazing at giving me feedback with my work. At the time, I was barely freelancing, so they gave me so many tips. And when I was working through a project or a larger assignment, they would just always be there to support me," Rios says. "So, yes, Women Photograph allowed for so many opportunities for me."

Paying It Forward

Having been on the receiving end of so much support, Rios had long wanted to give back and, in 2019, landed an adjunct teaching position at her alma mater, St. John's University. (She also teaches

high school students photography at the Bronx Documentary Center with its founder, Michael Kamber.)

Top on her list was cultivating real-

With Bendiciones, "you see so much of myself through the images, and it's a goal of mine to bring that to assignment work."

world photojournalism skills that her undergrad program lacked when she was enrolled. "The professors did a really good job of letting me explore things creatively." Rios also said her photojournalism professor was great at teaching her the ethics behind capturing images. But students weren't required to put it all together and work the way current photojournalists

do in a newsroom.

Rios wanted to change that, so her courses emphasize practical skills, such as captioning and the respon-

sibility that goes with writing captions, as well as how to reach out to editors, put together a portfolio, apply for workshops and get internships. "I never did an internship out of school, and I think that really made it difficult to get myself out there, get my work out there, try to speak with people and other opportunities because I didn't have experience in a newsroom.



So, I really try to push my students into looking for opportunities like that," she says.

Adapting Curriculum for Online Learning And Focusing On Personal Projects

Since St. John's spring semester was moved online due to COVID-19, Rios had to rethink her curriculum, but her proclivity for relationship-building remained. "I'm trying to make this a creative outlet right now, so I paired each of [my students] with another student who are either in the same time zone or in a completely different state because they all had to go back home. Having photo dialogues, making a picture every day and learning how to analyze and respond to photography," she explains, lets them explore the medium outside of the classroom setting.

"All of their documentary project ideas"—a capstone of the course—"aren't achievable right now. So, they're making very personal work: How their



Top: Ama's Bible opened to Psalm 91 and Eliseo's hilo rojo on Ama's nightstand in her bedroom on March 21, 2018, in Fort Worth, Texas. To stop Eliseo's hiccups, Bianca placed el hilo rojo, or a red thread, on his forehead. She was unable to find the red thread after nursing the baby and later found it inside Ama's bible.

Bottom: A framed picture of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Ama's living room on March 14, 2019, in Fort Worth, Texas.



Julianna, Bianca and Michelle Castillo (left to right), who are sisters and also the photographer's cousins, outside of Ama's home on Easter Sunday on April 1, 2018, in Fort Worth, Texas. "We celebrate Easter by throwing or smashing hollowed-out chicken eggs filled with confetti, traditionally known as *cascarones*, over each other's heads," says Rios.

families are responding to the coronavirus or how they're responding or scenes on the street when they do go out grocery shopping. They're all very personal projects, which I'm all for because personal projects have so much to do with building yourself as a photographer."

It's something she keeps front and center as she navigates her own career, too. "You can work on all these assignments, but you always have to make sure to check in with that project that gave you so much passion, so much inspiration," says Rios.

For her, one of those projects is *Bendiciones*, an homage to her family, specifically her grandmother, who emigrated from Mexico in the late 1960s and is always offering family members "bendiciones" or her blessings. "My mom's side of the family is predominantly women, and so I started photographing our relationship to each

other and also with the matriarch of the family, my grandmother, who I call 'Ama,' or 'love.'"

Rios had only ever focused on stories outside of her own, so turning the camera onto herself and something that she loves, her family, was challenging. Rios is still sorting through this personal photographic exploration, which remains an ongoing project, and all that it means. But one thing is clear: These familial relationships have come to define her professional vision, which is often trained on social injustices and women's issues.

"Some photographers have sort of a niche; they know they tell these specific stories. I think because I'm so early into my career, I'm still understanding that, but there are definitely assignments that really hit home for me, and they all reflect back to my family, what makes me, me." With *Bendiciones*,

"you see so much of myself through the images, and it's a goal of mine to bring that to assignment work, too."

In the end, creating a stable and productive career as a photojournalist "is all about perseverance and dedication," Rios says, "because there's going to be a lot of rejection. If photojournalism is something you're truly passionate about, it's up to you not to give up on that. Everyone has a unique perspective. Everyone should show it. We need more creative people out there. We need more storytellers out there. There's never too many of them." DPP

For more on Desiree Rios' work, go to desireerios.com

Opposite: Ama prepares breakfast inside her kitchen on March 22, 2019, in Fort Worth, Texas.