

PDNEDU ASKS PHOTOGRAPHERS



In documentary photography and filmmaking, building a relationship with your subjects is critical to the foundation of a good story. But given the often sensitive subjects inherent in documentary work, how do you tell those stories with care? Here, we asked seven image-makers to share their insight on forming meaningful photographer-subject relationships.

[Compiled by Jacqui Palumbo]

"What is your best tip for gaining access to your subjects' private lives, and how are you sensitive to sharing those private moments in a public space?"



PEOPLE TRUST YOU IF YOU FIRST TRUST THEM. That's my work ethic as a photojournalist. If I give something and open up to the person I photograph, then they will open up to me. It takes time to build a relationship—I don't go into a story thinking that I will

get the most intimate shots from the very beginning, but hoping that I will enrich somebody's life as much as photographing them will enrich mine. It's a two-way street. Once I have the photographs, accuracy in telling the story behind the photographs is just as important as the trust I have with my subjects. All I try is to make sure I get the story right when I share those private moments with the rest of the world. If I manage to do that, everything else falls into place.

ROXANA POP

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"ACCESS" IS A COMPLEX WORD. When working on documentary stories I tend to view my relationship with people as starting a collaboration rather than gaining access. Communicating intent for the story and discussing the potential outcomes of

publication is a big part of that. So is being honest

with yourself about why you're interested in the story. People respect when you're up front with them, even if you're not sure which direction the piece may take. I've learned that having continual, open conversations about the project and where it may end up is fundamental to building respect, understanding and trust.

ALEXANDRA HOOTNICK

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IT'S EASY TO SAY, "BE HONEST ABOUT YOUR INTENTIONS,

and where and how the images will be used and what for, then sign the release paper and leave." But for me, gaining access to our subjects' private lives is not my main question—it's, "If I get access to that subject's private

life, how can the images be used to change the way someone thinks, and give people other ideas about the subject you're shooting?" When you come up with an answer to that, vague or clear, then you'd have all the excuse to entering their private lives. Otherwise, gaining access for the sake of gaining access is, as David Hurn says, "exploitation, not exploration." Someone's private life is not a gold mine.

JOSHUA IRWANDI

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THE BEST WAY TO GAIN TRUST WITH YOUR SUBJECTS

is to strive for a truly empathetic attitude toward them. Once they feel as if you understand them they will begin to take a posture of comfort with you. The best way to be sensitive in what you share

about your subject is to just ask yourself, "If I were them, would I want this information to be public?" and learn.

DOUGLAS GAUTRAUD

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YOU NEED TO HAVE GENUINE EMPATHY AND RESPECT—YOU CAN'T FAKE IT.

And as for what you share, I am always transparent and first ask permission. It is important that [your subjects] understand where these photos

could end up. These days, I try to bring a model release.

This is not just to protect myself, but rather for the people I am photographing to understand that these images could end up online and in public spaces.

AMI VITALE

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TAKE YOUR TIME. MAKE THEM FEEL COMFORTABLE. EARN THEIR RESPECT.

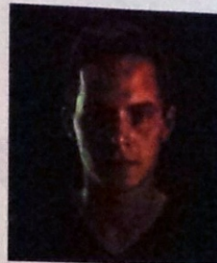
I try and spend a lot of time with people (especially without having my equipment around) before I photograph them. I eat with them, help them with their daily chores, sleep in their houses,

etc. They need to realize that you aren't there just for that one picture. Once this realization happens, they are very keen to return the favor, to understand how an outsider perceives them and their emotions. I always try to do a follow-up tour where I carry prints of my pictures from the first leg and distribute them to the people I shot with. I returned from my Ethiopia follow-up tour recently

after distributing my prints from my 2014 trip there. The locals will witness your sincerity toward your craft, which in turn increases their trust, strengthens your bond and gets you the all-important "all-access backstage pass" that every travel photographer covets.

TRUPAL PANDYA

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I JUST TRY TO BE MYSELF WHEN I APPROACH PEOPLE I WANT TO PHOTOGRAPH.

I think if you try to do anything else, people can sense that and get wary. Be a human being first, and put yourself in the shoes of the people you are photographing. I always try to be

honest, respectful and grateful to the people who let me into their private lives, and most of the time that builds a level of trust. Trust is key in any relationship, and is extremely important between photographer and subject.

ANDREW RENNEISEN

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IT'S A BIT HARD TO GENERALIZE BECAUSE EVERY STORY IS UNIQUE,

but in my experience, it takes time to earn trust. With long-term projects, investing time in establishing a relationship has been my best way to get authentic, storytelling moments. Often the

work gets better as the relationship evolves and the subject knows you better, has seen some of the work and understands the end goal. But for many stories there just isn't enough time, so it helps greatly to be vetted and introduced by a trusted person in a subject's life. The subject is the vulnerable one in this relationship, so I try to put myself in their position and be comfortable with the images I make. I do what I have to do to get the strongest work; I owe it to my subject.

STEVE SIMON

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