

GABRIEL SCARLETT
College Photographer of the Year

Budding photographers achieve greatness through persistence, empathy

I remember the first time I saw a flier for CPOY while an undergraduate at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I wasn't sure what CPOY stood for until I read the flier closer: College Photographer of the Year. I was intimidated from the start. The quality of images produced was a far cry from my first steps in photography. I was in awe. I wondered: How could someone my age be making this type of work?

At the time, I could barely make toast, much less anything of substance photographically.

I didn't have the maturity or the mental strength to push past the comfort of my roots. The intensity and beauty of the work seemed too distant. I kept thinking: This work was done by a college student? While in awe, I also realized what was possible, that if they could do work of this stature, so could I. In a way, it provided the beginnings of a map. It also served as a much-needed alert of the job competition that lay ahead. There was work that needed to be done to catch up.

I think back to those days each time a new winner is announced. I can't help but wonder what their backstory is and what got them to this position. It's impressive and often stems from a work ethic, respect for others' condition and doggedness that's rare for someone not far removed from high school.

This year's winner, Gabriel Scarlett, 22, embodies these aspects. A senior at Western Kentucky University, he expects to graduate in 2019, the same year he will be a National Geographic intern. Each year Geographic awards a 10-week internship to the winner of CPOY.

"It is incredible," Scarlett said about the pending internship. "That was the achievement I hoped to reach in college. Geographic can give its photographers time and resources for their long-form storytelling that I would simply not find anywhere else."

It's a return of sorts from his introduction to photography. Like many of us, it stemmed from inspiration from National Geographic.

"I saw a TED Talk by Aaron Huey on the Pine Ridge Reservation in high school," he said. "I was floored by it. Growing up in Ohio, I had known

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Julian Rodriguez at home with his boy Christopher, the child that changed his life. Julian's decades-long struggle with addiction brought him intimately close to the gang operations as he often bought from and sold for the gangs in order to support his own addiction.

Two years ago, with Christopher on the way, Julian achieved sobriety. "Everything that I desire and want in this life is for that boy," he explains. Christopher will grow up on the east side of Pueblo, Colo., deep in Duke territory, but Julian hopes that a loving relationship with his father can keep him away from the gang lifestyle.





Jennifer and Cameron

share ice cubes and a few kisses on a hot evening in Teviston, California. Both their parents emigrated from Oklahoma with the rest of the “Black Okies” in mid-Twentieth Century to work the fields of the Central Valley. Jennifer moved to the cities briefly but has been forced to return to her family’s crumbling home to raise her two children.

Derion Chavis, left, before his bull ride at the all-black rodeo. City of Industry, California. August 2018. “In rodeo, the hardest person to beat is yourself,” he says. “I love the fact that I’m a young man that rides. You have to dream and breathe this if you want to be the best in the sport.”

Image Deconstructed

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nothing of the reservation system and its dark, genocidal history. His words and photographs brought me to tears.”

He recounted how he showed it in his English class. “I talked about it with friends for weeks.” But, as he prepared for choosing a college and a career, “it didn’t seem like a realistic option.” That was until he came across Western Kentucky University and learned about the quality of the program. After a visit, he was hooked and, on encouragement from family, decided to attend.

I’m always impressed by this. It didn’t really cross my mind to already be thinking about the profession at such a young age. I was much more interested in other things, toast aside. It’s part of what helps the quality of work like Scarlett’s stand out. It’s not just a keen sense of visuals, but, at root, a committed work ethic to the craft.

Too often, people think that to make it in photography, it’s based principal-

ly on talent alone. Time and again, the back-story reveals something different: a commitment to being willing to work hard with intelligence.

From the start of school, Scarlett wanted to find a community that could support this approach.

He found this in his classmates, whom he credits.

“I started hanging around more of the upperclassmen,” Scarlett said. “Seeing what recent grads had just done was what made it click for me: I thought, ‘Oh, it’s all possible.’”

And here Scarlett hits on a key point. “Early on I started to compare my quality of work to professionals, and not just to fellow college students,” Scarlett said. “If I wanted to be in that arena (the professional), then I needed to strive for that quality and intentionality in my approach.”

I admired this approach. In college, I was shy and reticent to think of myself as having the worth to step forward in the professional arena. This isn’t to say that

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early career photographers should be cocky, but I also advocate they shouldn't self-limit. It's within self-limitation that we often hold ourselves back. It's encouraging to see people like Scarlett, as well as the runner-up CPOY winner Josie Norris, produce such impressive work.

Much of this is rooted in the approach.

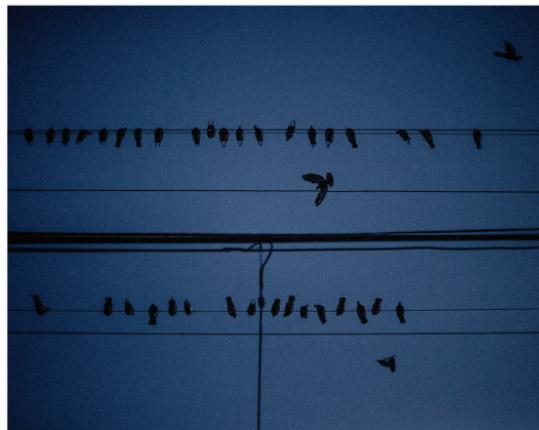
"I learned to work smarter, not just harder," Scarlett said. "When I see a great photo, I really am thinking, 'How did they make people feel so comfortable? How were they able to have people want them to be there? Why is this imaging affecting me and how does it affect others?'"

"I'm trying to follow in footsteps of not just the great photographers who make pretty images, but people who really think through the concepts, the ideas behind what they're doing and the impact of their visual narratives."

He looks for inspiration all around him and, in particular, photographers who speak on a deeper level about photography.

"I'm trying to follow in footsteps of not just the great photographers who make pretty images, but people who really think through the concepts, the ideas behind what they're doing and the impact of their visual narratives. These people are visual authors and journalists. Photographers like Sarah Blesener and Peter van Agtmael and Pete Muller. They're not just following visual tropes or superficial images; these are incredibly intellectually gifted people working to produce thoughtful photography."

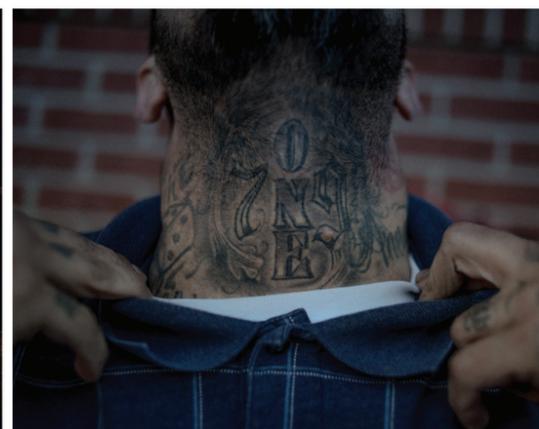
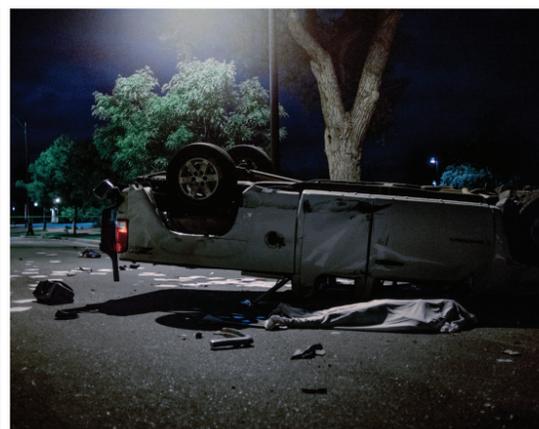
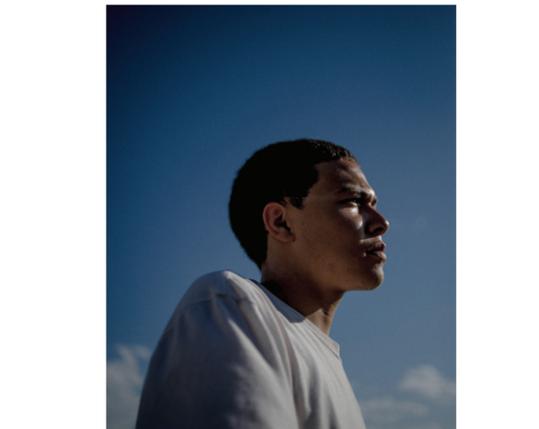
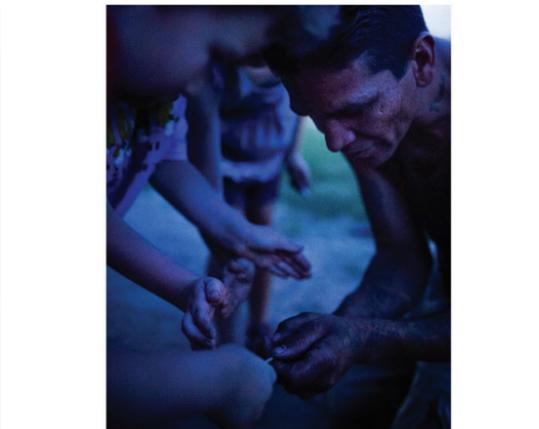
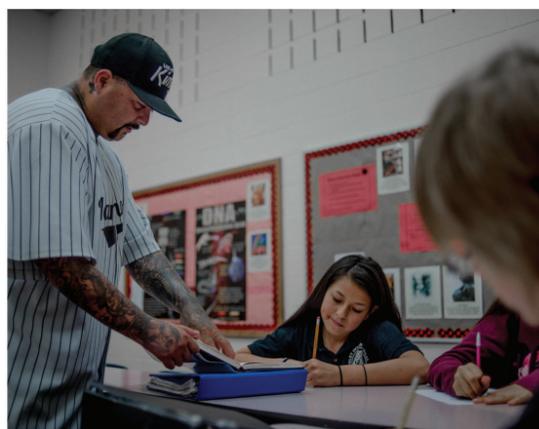
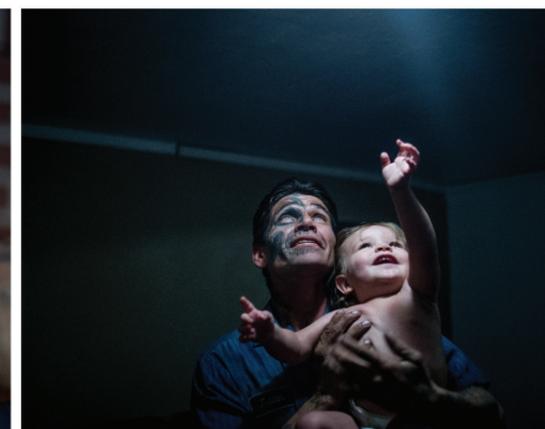
This approach has not only helped win the CPOY recognition, but it's also led to two pivotal internships: one at The



Gabriel Scarlett

"I study photojournalism, Arabic and emergency medicine at Western Kentucky University and plan to graduate by December of 2019. I hope to advocate through my storytelling. So far, my work has examined social issues within the United States, with special interests in stories of immigration, incarceration, environmental racism and economic divide. I have worked for the Los Angeles Times and The Denver Post. I will be working at National Geographic Magazine in 2019.

I like to run, climb rocks, pick on a small guitar and listen to audiobooks and podcasts. But I most enjoy thoughtful journalism and visual storytelling. The power of great minds in this field who truly 'get it.' Writers like Dexter Filkins and Michael Herr and photographers like Sarah Blesener and Peter van Agtmael. As a close friend has said, we must seek intentionality in all we do."



Denver Post and one at the Los Angeles Times. Before each internship, he researched the area and came up with ideas. And it's at The Denver Post where he connected with the subject of the lead photograph seen on page 57, taken in Pueblo, Colorado.

"Before I was ever interested in gang issues in Pueblo, I simply thought that it was also an interesting Rust Belt town. I walked around the east side neighborhood on July 3rd and 4th and ended up walking up to Julian Rodriguez," Scarlett said.

Rodriguez is a former drug addict — he's clean now — whose dependency forced him to buy from and sell for the local street gangs during his decades of drug use. Scarlett photographed him with his son on his front lawn, returning the next day with some pictures he printed at Walmart, which opened up, literally, a door to his house: Rodriguez gave Scarlett a key. We spoke about the images, which struck me with their sense of compassion.

"I'm glad that the kindness came through; he's one of the kindest people

I've met," Scarlett said of the portrait with Rodriguez's son. "He had an unimaginable childhood, and he wants to raise his son the opposite way he was raised."

"I hope that quiet images like this one will always have a place in my work. Julian's tattoo hints at his past, but the way he holds his boy is the real story, the deeper one. 'Everything that I desire and want in this life is for that boy,' Julian has said. It is my job to put those words into a photograph. I hope I came close."

It's also representative of his overall approach. Scarlett works tirelessly, devoting even winter breaks to work on the projects that he began the

summer before. Much of his work is funded through grants such as Reuters Storytelling Grant, the Dave Martin Grant from the Atlanta Photojournalism Seminar, and the Alexia Foundation Student Award of Excellence.

It all adds up to promising steps toward opportunity within our field, a path paved with the tradition of hard work, intelligence and respect for others' condition. ■

Ross Taylor is an assistant professor at the University of Colorado Boulder. He's on the board of directors for NPPA and is also the chair of the quarterly multimedia contest. He is the creator of imagedeconstructed.com. Website: rosstaylor.net.