

Care About Your Subjects, But Also Care About Yourself

Self-care is something we should talk about more than we do. We celebrate those in our field who work under some of the hardest emotional strains, and yet too often, we assume that it won't affect us mentally. How could it not?

Over the years, I've been fortunate enough to witness the breadth of humanity, from small-town parades to conflict zones. Often it involved tragedy in the most intimate of manners. Like many others I know, I pushed into situations with disregard for my mental cost. I thought I could have a camera serve as a buffer, a barrier that would shield some of the emotional impacts.

Looking back, I wish I had put in more thought. A lot of the emotional cost lingers. It sticks.

The impact of engaging in high-intensity experiences needs to be addressed, even at an early age in the profession. When thinking about this topic, I wanted to focus on a student's work. I can't think of a better example than Moriah Ratner, 22, a senior at Syracuse University. I recently met her after a friend of mine introduced us. She was looking for mentors, as well as other people who are in the same position as she.

Ratner is documenting the tragic end-of-life story of Lola Muñoz, 13. The girl is dying of an aggressive form of a brain tumor, called diffuse intrinsic pontine glioma (DIPG). What began as a class project for Ratner has bloomed into an intense immersion into Lola's life. Ratner has often left school on a Thursday to live with the family, returning on the following Monday.

"I've spent so much time with them," Ratner said. "I was counting the days at one point — in October it was 100 days. Now we're into December."

I applaud her commitment to Lola and her family. It's rare to see that level of devotion in photojournalism, either as a professional or as a student. It's clear how much respect she has for the story.

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Above: Lola Muñoz fights through the pain of getting an IV as she is treated for severe dehydration after being admitted to Upstate Golisano Children's Hospital in Syracuse, New York. Photo by Moriah Ratner

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Moriah Ratner

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"I prioritize it over everything," Ratner said. "I'm going to do whatever it takes to tell her story. She deserves to be remembered. I feel it's my duty to do Lola's story justice."

She feels it is important to portray the reality of Lola's path. Ratner believes there is a disconnect in how the media can present a sanitized version of what it is like for a family to face childhood cancer.

"It feels as though there is an attempt to remove uncomfortable realities because it is hard for people to watch," Ratner said. "I want to defy this idea through providing a visual resource that serves as a testimony to the reality faced by a child with terminal cancer."

She's right. I've documented an end-of-life story, and it's brutally intense at times. Witnessing it intimately affects anyone deeply. The pain associated with this can be deeply disturbing.

That said, one of our roles is to tell as complete a story as possible. In this idea, Ratner is dogged.

"There is so much more to Lola than the fact that she has cancer. She doesn't want to be pitied. I will never give up on Lola. When you love someone, you will fight for them," Ratner said.

After looking at her images, it is clear that her commitment to the family was profound. Her level of intimacy and access is reflective of someone who held the family in great regard. Lola's mom said Ratner worried and cared for Lola like she would one of her own. This sense of connection is demonstrated throughout her work.

"I can't expect my viewers to feel if I don't feel myself," Ratner said. "Being emotionally involved is how the connection is made."

I asked Ratner if she was taking care of herself. I don't think I would have asked this earlier in my career when conversations often focused more on how to make strong images, access and of course, respect for the conditions of the others.

"I was sad all the time," Ratner said. "I didn't know what I was feeling was grief because I never learned. We don't talk about how stories can affect you emotionally."



Moriah Ratner with Lola. Photo by Marianne Barthelemy

"Grief comes from love, and I believe if you live through it, you live to tell about it," she continued. "I am thankful for the path grief has led me and whose path I have crossed because of it."

It also had a physical toll on her, which is not surprising. She wasn't sleeping well and had low energy. Lola's story was all she could think about. The grief was all-consuming.

The more immersive a story becomes, the less the idea of balance is considered. Sometimes it's required to tell the story. But it comes with a price.

"Everything was a trigger," Ratner said. "I couldn't see anything mattering as much as being with Lola because I didn't know how much time I had left with her."

Lola's story is tragic, and it's a stark reminder of the fragility of life. It is intensely sad. I think it's common for photographers who document these situations to at times feel alone. Ratner experienced this struggle almost immediately. She would show her work to other students but got little feedback.

"It hurt my feelings because I was investing so much time on this story. I yearned for and was so eager for advice



and feedback from them," Ratner said.

Ratner withdrew from a lot of her friends and family. She didn't think they would understand because they weren't experiencing what she was but also didn't see that her supporters were doing their best they could to relate to her.

"It took me a while to realize that it wasn't that they didn't have anything to say, it was that they didn't know how to say it," Ratner said. "We haven't learned the skills to talk about these things."

I couldn't agree more, and not just in the classroom, but in our profession. It's important to take care of ourselves

mentally and physically, especially during moments like these. For myself, that often means eating better, exercise and, on occasion, seeing a therapist. If we are not solid, it can be hard to tell the stories of others.

Ratner is spending more time on self-care. She credits journaling as something that has helped her remain focused on telling the best story possible. She learned that the strength of her work would suffer if she weren't emotionally stable. It is an open and honest space for release.

It's a stability I feel is required to share intense stories like Lola's. I think aligning

yourself with compassionate people who are willing to listen without judgment is important, too, which is why I feel lucky to have connected with Ratner. It's important to feel heard and to know you're not alone.

"I care about helping people," Ratner said. "I do not put my energy towards personal gains but rather a belief in helping others as my purpose in life. We can't control everything that happens to us, but we can control how we interact with the situations we are in."

Lola will always be a part of Ratner. This photographer's determination to

treat her subject with the utmost care has my respect. It's respect that also is the impetus to take care of one's self.

Editor's note: Lola Muñoz died on April 2 from complications of her disease.

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Moriah Ratner's work can be seen at moriahratner.com.