

PHOTO BY DAVID BURNETT

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The eyes of hope

Photographer David Burnett talks about exchanging views with street paper vendors

BY RICHARD FLYNN
STREET NEWS SERVICE

In July, the legendary photographer David Burnett and his team worked with homeless vendors from Street Roots' sister paper The Big Issue in Scotland to help them capture their daily lives in photographs and film. This unique workshop culminated in a photo exhibition launched on Thursday at the BBC Scotland headquarters in Glasgow.

"I was just a kid, wandering my way through, figuring things out," remembers David Burnett of his first job: an internship at Time magazine. "It was a hell of a lot of fun. I was not a great photographer, but I got a little better while I was there. You don't have to be the star the first week you're taking pictures. You just have to work hard and get to the point you're putting everything you've got into your pictures. It's not like a chemistry class where you can learn it; you just have to feel it. That takes a little while to get in touch with."

Burnett has been putting everything into his pictures for more than 40 years. The world-renowned snapper has worked in more than 80 countries; captured revolutions in Iran and Chile; borne witness to famine in Ethiopia; covered every U.S. presidential election since 1976 and every Olympic Games since 1984. Starting his own New York agency in the mid-70s, Burnett has forged his own way of working on magazine assignments, keen to experiment wherever possible and unhampered by the

demands of working for a wire service or daily newspapers.

The American photographer's latest project sees him in Glasgow, working with Big Issue vendors to help them capture their daily experiences in photos and film. At workshop sessions in the city, Burnett and his team from the charity collective Photographers for Hope have been guiding six novices through the medium. Organized by the Glasgow-based International Network of Street Papers (INSP), an exhibition of the photographs by both street paper vendors and professional photographers was launched at BBC Scotland's headquarters in July (See page 8).

"We're working with the vendors so they can show what their lives are like, using photography as a tool to do that," explains Burnett. "It's exciting. It's about giving people who haven't had much experience of photography the chance to see if it's something that clicks a button for them. We're trying to open people up to photography. Some folks get it quickly; some can spend days and days and they don't. Some people are just born with a bit of an artistic sensibility. But even if you're not, that's OK. The great thing about photography is you don't need to be licensed to do it; you can just pick up the camera and go."

In 1971, aged just 24, Burnett was sent by the weekly news magazine to cover America's gruesome adventures in Vietnam. He returned with remarkable pictures. The

photo of an exhausted young soldier reading a letter near the Laos border remains one of the war's most haunting images.

David took time out of his hectic schedule to discuss the Photographers for Hope exhibition and his work with the vendors.

Richard Flynn: *Looking back at your time with the vendors, what surprised you the most?*

David Burnett: You never know how this sort of workshop will turn out. You can take people who have grown up having a camera around the house, and everybody was always taking snapshots, and yet they may not necessarily be able to translate that into taking their own pictures. Then you'll have people who didn't spend a lot of time around photography when they were kids, and they have discovered a natural sensitivity, insight, and desire for using the camera to photograph their own life.

If you're a news photographer, you're taking pictures of everybody else's lives. But the most important pictures — the really fun, interesting ones — are of the things around us: our families, the places we know about, the things that are important to us. And in the case of the vendors, when you see how Malky went to places such as a doorway where he used to spend the night, there's something really touching about the ability to go and confront that kind of place. Obviously these are not places full of comfort for him. You realize that there is a lot of pain associated with that. I would have

to say, you see a kind of growth going on there — the ability to face these things and just take your camera and focus on it — that I thought was really very impressive.

R.F.: *In terms of gathering content for the exhibition, how did the photography sessions turn out?*

D.B.: I could walk out on the street with my camera right now and I don't know what I'd get, so it's hard to try and imagine what another person could be doing. But when we were going through all the pictures and deciding what to keep for the exhibition, it was tough because there were many more great, symbolic pictures than we would have expected from any kind of group that was just starting out. You can never have too many good pictures and in this case we were really happy to see how much we were able to land.

Those pictures belong solely to the vendors. It's their work and, more importantly, it's their vision. Everybody did something very personal in what they photographed and those will end up being the best shots. Photography is a physical skill but it is also a metaphysical one. It can be incredibly emotional.

R.F.: *Do you think your workshop has left a lasting impression on the vendors? Are any of*

See EYES, page 10

David Burnett's intuition for capturing a powerful moment has produced some of the most iconic photos of the past 40 years, including this portrait of Barack Obama; Mary Decker's defeat at the 1984 Olympics; and a soldier in Vietnam reading a letter from home.



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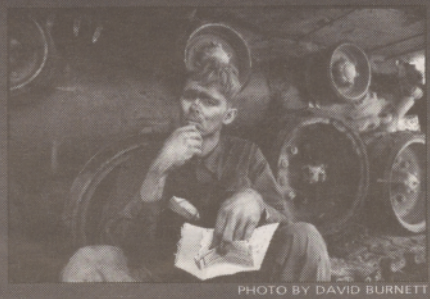


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