

PhotoLife

YOUR GUIDE TO EVERYTHING PHOTO
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INTO THE LIGHT

HELPING OTHERS, ONE IMAGE AT A TIME

BY CLAIRE SYKES

A garbage-strewn cemetery in Manila. A dusty jute mill in Calcutta. Earthquake-rubbed streets in Nepal. Since 2005, Larry Louie has travelled from his home in Edmonton to some of the most remote places in the world, making social documentary photography of people living and working in the most difficult conditions.

In his black-and-white photos, people lug heavy bricks, shovel smoking charcoal and pick through toxic trash. They also laugh with friends and cradle their babies. Louie shows us the enduring capacity of the human spirit to rise above the pain—with faith and family, resilience and renewal, and hope and even happiness.

Seeing means everything to Louie, who practices optometry at his Louie Eyecare Center. Here he also exhibits his prints, which have won him many awards, including the Lucie Awards 2007 Discovery of the Year; National Geographic 2010 Traveler of the Year; National Geographic 2010 World in Focus, First Place; and the 2012 Black and White Spider Award, First Place. His first monograph, *Beyond the Darkness*, is due out this summer.

While Louie receives recognition for his work, he makes sure to give back. His photos appear in the promotional materials for NGOs such as Seva Canada and Oxfam. He also has donated toys, school supplies and money to places he's photographed and sponsored cataract procedures for an eye-surgery camp in Nepal, bringing with him a thousand pairs of sunglasses for patients and other villagers.

From his home in Edmonton, Louie talks about what he gains from taking photographs and how they make a positive difference in this world.

YOU'RE AN OPTOMETRIST AND A PHOTOGRAPHER. HOW DO THESE TWO PROFESSIONS RELATE FOR YOU?

It's all about the eyes for me. Letting people see things is my purpose in life. As an optometrist, improving their eyesight allows them to see the world, and my photography lets them see the world through my eyes.

Photography can be a catalyst for helping to change the world.

WHAT OF THE WORLD DO YOU WANT THEM TO SEE IN YOUR PHOTOS?

That we're all the same, that the world is full of people who want to love and be loved and care for and be cared for by others, no matter where they live, whether it's Canada or Kathmandu. I also want to shock people a little bit, in showing these difficult living situations. That's why it's important that my photos are visually beautiful, so people will want to look at them. Hopefully, they'll want to know more about the places I've been to and start conversations with others about them. In this way, photography can be a catalyst for helping to change the world.

WHAT DO YOU GET FROM YOUR PHOTOGRAPHY?

I like being out in the world and connecting with people. Travelling is my passion. And photography is a way for me to do that, as I record my experiences of places and people I've met.

WHY DO YOU GO TO THE PLACES YOU DO?

I'm a curious person. I like to know what happens on "the other side of the door." Photography gives me a reason to walk through that door to another place. I want to learn more about the way people in the harshest environments are able to overcome obstacles and rise above them. Though I wasn't born into, or raised in, nearly as dismal of situations [as those] that I've photographed, I had to overcome obstacles of my own growing up.

WHAT KIND OF OBSTACLES?

In 1967, our family left Hong Kong for Edmonton without knowing English and as strangers, with no family or friends waiting for us here. My working-class parents took menial jobs to get by and focused on us learning to assimilate. Here I was this six-year-old boy, a foreign kid with glasses, an outsider. Not knowing the language, I took in this new world with my eyes and also let them do most of the talking. The visual was everything to me. *Continued on page 38*



© LARRY LOUIE



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CANON EOS 5D MARK II, 24 MM, F/5.6, 1/320 S, ISO 100. © LARRY LOUIE



CANON EOS 5D MARK III, 24 MM, F/14, 1/250 S, ISO 400. © LARRY LOUIE



CANON EOS 5D MARK II, 24 MM, F/11, 1/125 S, ISO 400. © LARRY LOUIE



CANON EOS 5D MARK III, 24 MM, F/6.3, 1/60 S, ISO 2000. © LARRY LOUIE



CANON EOS 5D MARK III, 24 MM, F/6.3, 1/160 S, ISO 800. © LARRY LOUIE

WHEN AND HOW DID YOU FIRST GET INTO PHOTOGRAPHY?

On my 12th birthday, I received a Kodak 110 Instamatic camera and took pictures of street scenes, snowy trees, the Prairies and the distant Rocky Mountains. A few years later, I discovered a run-down part of Edmonton and got to know the homeless people there, and soon I was photographing them. And I couldn't get enough of *National Geographic*, showing me all the places in the world I could go. More than anything, I wanted to be an international documentary photographer. But my parents insisted that, as a first-generation Chinese immigrant, I take a more secure and practical career route.

SO YOU CHOSE OPTOMETRY.

I applied to many different faculties [at the University of Waterloo, in Ontario] and was accepted by quite a few of them, including optometry. I saw a nice correlation between my vision as a photographer and the practical world of health care to help people with their eyesight. Optometry was also a great avenue toward making a decent living and being my own boss, which would allow me the time and money to eventually travel and do more photography.

I'm a curious person. I like to know what happens on "the other side of the door."

WHAT CONTINUED TO FEED YOUR PHOTOGRAPHY ALONG THE WAY?

While in college on a trip to New York, I saw a Josef Koudelka exhibit at the Guggenheim Museum. His black-and-white photos of gypsies and others living on the margins really moved me, and I realized I wanted to someday do humanitarian documentary photography. But for the first twelve years of my optometry practice, I put photography on the back burner while I focused on my career. I'm a very driven person; I don't do anything halfway. So, I knew in order to be successful as an optometrist, I had to put one hundred percent into it.

HOW DID YOU START PHOTOGRAPHING AGAIN?

Once my practice was going strong, about sixteen years ago, my wife Joanna [Wong] and I decided to travel. We went to Tibet and Africa, Nepal and Kathmandu and took a lot of pictures of beautiful landscapes and the tribes and customs of the people. Without me knowing, my wife submitted one of my photos to a *National Geographic* annual photo competition, and I won second place. That was 2007. It changed my life, leading me to a greater purpose with my photography.



© LARRY LOUIE

The winning photo got this “local boy makes it big” full-page article in the city paper and on the Edmonton TV news. This caught the attention of Seva Canada, an NGO that helps restore sight and prevent blindness in developing countries. They saw a perfect match in my being both an optometrist and photographer and hired me to take pictures for their website, calendar, and other promotional and educational materials. I’d take vacations from my practice to travel. Soon I was also photographing for Oxfam, which addresses poverty, injustice and inequality, and other causes. Working with these and other NGOs has allowed me to explore the world while helping people. My photos communicate to others, in a small way, to look into these organizations that do good work and donate to them.

HOW DO YOU APPROACH THE PEOPLE YOU PHOTOGRAPH?

The most important thing for me is to try to tell their stories in a truthful and genuine way. I’m an outsider looking in, not looking to influence them or change anything about the way they live, except to help them, through the NGOs, to have fresh water, food, good health and an education. So, I want to be that fly on the wall. This takes being friendly and quiet and sitting back, giving people time to get comfortable with me and trust that I’m not out to exploit them. Because I can’t talk with

them, unless I have an interpreter with me, smiles and handshakes are the language. The longer I’m there with people, the less obvious I am to them, the more natural they’ll be.

WHAT DO YOU LOOK FOR IN PEOPLE WHEN YOU PHOTOGRAPH THEM?

To me, it’s all about people’s faces and eyes and hand gestures and body positioning within their environment, so there’s a human story there. And I’m trying to capture happy moments. I want to see the positive things in their lives. They have no choice where they live, but their worlds are not all about suffering. There’s enjoyment there too. Kids play hide-and-seek, and parents cradle their children. So I look for a small smile or a glimmer of acceptance in their eyes. It’s a gut feeling when I photograph. But you can’t be “snap happy” in these situations because people get annoyed, wondering why you’re taking so many pictures of them. You’ve got to be patient.

WHILE YOUR PHOTOGRAPHY HELPS CHANGE OTHERS’ LIVES, HOW HAS IT CHANGED YOURS?

It’s made me more compassionate and less selfish. Photography has taught me to help other people more. I’ve learned that giving is a much stronger drug than taking. There’s no way I can save the world, but I can help make people’s lives better, one person—one photograph—at a time. ●