

Staying focused: Alan Solomon views life through the lens

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Steve MacIntyre photo

Photojournalist Alan E. Solomon sits on his patio at his home in Las Cruces with some of his past work. Solomon's photographs have been published in The New York Times, USA Today, Life magazine, Newsweek, Time, and People, to name just a few.

*By David Salcido
For My Las Cruces*

They say that a single picture is worth a thousand words. If that's true, Alan Solomon has written volumes. For close to 50 years, the New York native has documented moments that have defined pivotal events in history, first through the lens of his trusty Olympus camera, then, later, in the digital realm. His photos have graced the pages of such notable periodicals as The New York Times, USA Today, Life Magazine, Newsweek, Time and People, to name just a few.

Beginning as a tabloid photographer in the early '60s, Solomon soon found his niche shooting everybody from the famous to the infamous. "Mafia hits, serial killers, famous people... if they made news in the upstate New York area," he says, "I shot them."

The list of celebrities who have had Solomon's camera trained on them reads like a who's who of late 20th century notoriety: Mario Cuomo, Leonard Bernstein, Mike Tyson, Rudy Giuliani, Ethan Hawke, Gwyneth Paltrow, Bill and Hilary Clinton, Arlo Guthrie and Mark Morris among them.

These days, Alan Solomon lives on the East Mesa of Las Cruces, with his artist wife, Olivia. Here since 2004, he enjoys a relatively quiet life, though he will be the first to tell you that he is far from retired. "This is a great area," he says. "I've covered stories out here for a couple of agencies. Everybody from the Times to the Associated Press has wanted me to go to Juárez, but I enjoy living too much. I'm not going to Juárez. There are enough human-interest stories in this area. I don't need to cover that. I like people stories. Interesting people doing interesting things."

It has always been that way for Alan Solomon who — despite forays into accounting (where he learned to hate Mondays), a stint as an EMT for a volunteer rescue squad and even a tour of duty as a military policeman during the Vietnam War — has always returned to his first love: photography. Bitten by the bug early, he has been training his camera on newsworthy events since his teens. He sold his first image when he was just 16 years old, to United Press International. He credits his mother, a nurse during the Korean War who taught wounded soldiers photography in her spare time, for setting him on that path.

"She taught soldiers how to print their pictures," he says fondly. "I remember watching the pictures come up in the trays, in that yellow light that you have in the darkroom, pictures taken in Korea of soldiers with frostbitten legs laying wounded, taken with Leica cameras, and I was just fascinated with the whole process. The magic of seeing a photo come up in the tray... Almost any photographer who has been around for years will tell you that it's magic when they first see the image appear on a blank, white sheet of paper. It's very powerful."

From there, he joined a camera club at age 13, where he learned lighting and composition. The rest, as they say, is history. "I never turned down a job in the beginning," he admits. "The tabloids used me a lot. The New York Post and Daily News. If they knew there was a bone in the woods, they knew I'd find it. This was the time before having all of the access you now have for locating people. After a while, the Associated Press got interested in me, so I started working for them. At that time, I freelanced for almost anybody. It just went on and on and on. There was so much news."

Because he's been working in the field so long, Solomon often regales his listeners at one of his favorite hangout spots, Spirit Winds Coffee Bar, with tales of life as a photojournalist before the digital age.

"The way you did it back in the beginning was, you either went to a one hour photo, or you set a darkroom up in a motel room to develop photos. I got to be an expert at that. You have to be when you

travel for the wire services. This was before digital and e-mail. You transmitted it via a suitcase with a keyboard and a seven-inch screen through a system in the phone wires to New York City and it would go out over the world like that.”

Keeping up with the times, he made the transition to digital photography with the onset of the 21st century, a change he finds fascinating.

“I think it’s excellent, but it’s very hard to make the conversion. I went from film to digital for the Times in 2000, when I covered the trial for the four guys who killed a cop in New York City and I had a lot of trouble with it initially. It’s a different kind of animal. The equipment is just as good now. It’s equal to slide film, which is the top. I love it.”

Gone are the days when he monitored police scanners so he could rush out and capture the moment, but he still keeps up with the news and can tell you what’s happening in Afghanistan, Iraq or Mexico, despite not having cable. He claims to get his information from PBS, NPR and the Internet. Most of the work he now does is conducted from a home office, comfortably furnished, with some of his favorite images hanging on the walls in understated metal frames.

“These are my memories,” he says. “The interesting thing is, when I look at those pictures, I remember everything about the event. I can’t remember what I ate for lunch three days ago, but I can remember every little incident about the picture.”

The public will soon get the opportunity to view some of these memorable images when Solomon is given his very first retrospective show in the Fall of 2011. He is currently working with the staff at the Branigan Cultural Center, to create an exhibit that will run the gamut of his experiences behind the camera.

“It will cover all aspects of what I’ve done, from sports to celebrities to murderers,” he explains. “I may put some wire photos up in one area, so you can see what that’s like... and maybe some news clippings. I’ll use pictures that were in Newsweek, Life, Time, People... all the biggies.”

In the meantime, Solomon continues to stay busy, as his website at AlanSolomonPhoto.com will attest. A member of the Doña Ana Camera Club, he has done some work for the NMSU Dance Department and hopes to begin teaching classes at the Adult Learning Center soon. Then, of course, there will always be those historic moments to capture, as he did when Barack Obama and Governor Bill Richardson made a stop here in Las Cruces during Obama’s 2008 campaign.

“I’ll never give that up,” he says. “It’s in my blood like ink. Freelancing has always been about taking a chance in an area that people say you can’t make a living in. I love that part of it. I feel blessed, because every Monday morning, I like.”

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