

Bob's Story

THE PICTURE OF COMPASSION: PHOTOGRAPHER FOUND HAPPINESS AT SHELTER LONG AFTER SECRETLY STORIED CAREER

Note: Chris Bohjalian was inspired to write the novel, "The Double Bind," while researching the story of Bob Campbell: A photographer who wound up homeless, and whose story Bohjalian recounted in the Burlington Free Press in December 2003. The following is that article.

by Chris Bohjalian

In 1947, Bob Campbell was a charismatic sixth-grader at the Bristol elementary school with the nickname of "Soupy" -- so christened by his friends because his last name appeared on the labels of the red cans in their parents' pantries, and not because he had a special fondness for soup. He read The New York Times every single day and tormented his teacher by signing his name, "Robert J. Campbell, Esq." He wasn't a lawyer (not then, not ever), and appending the word "esquire" to his last name apparently drove the usually unflappable Mrs. Stanton crazy.



In the 1960s, he was a successful photographer living in New York City's Greenwich Village. His work was appearing in music magazines and on album covers, and on a daily basis, he was snapping pictures of Chuck Berry, Flip Wilson, or Merlie Evers, widow of slain civil rights leader, Medgar Evers.

And in 1995, when he was just shy of 60, he arrived at the Daystation for Burlington's homeless run by COTS, the city's Committee on Temporary Shelter. He was, remembers Lucia Volino, currently a COTS community support worker but then a housing manager at the Daystation, broke, disabled and homeless.

Nevertheless, despite all that he'd lost, he still had a grin that glowed through his gray beaver beard and a magnetic sense of humor. His greeting to his friends at COTS over the next half-decade, even after COTS had found him an apartment in St. John's Hall, a heavily-subsidized 22-room apartment complex on Elmwood Avenue, was a good-natured parody of an iconic situation comedy greeting: "Honey, I'm home ... less!"

Campbell is in some ways a classic example of how quickly and easily a person can wind up homeless, despite friends or family, talent or brains. When he died in February 2002, he left behind in his apartment thousands of negatives and prints from his work as a photographer in the 1960s and 1970s.

And though he is a model of how swiftly a person's life can unravel, the images have become a testimony to something more: An illustration of the way an organization such as COTS builds new families and friends.

Campbell was born in New York in 1936, and only came to Bristol, Vt., after the Second World War. He arrived in 1946 with neither his mother nor father, and was raised through much of his adolescence by his aunt and uncle, Daniel and Elizabeth Borzone, in their white clapboard home in the village. Classmates were never sure why his aunt and uncle were caring for him, and Campbell never spoke of his family. Consequently, his fellow students

could only speculate.

"Sometimes we surmised his parents were well-to-do jet-setters, and didn't know what to do with a child—how to raise one," remembers classmate Ruth Trombley, who still lives in Bristol. Other students, including Shirley Purinton-Ahlberg—who lives now in Raleigh, N.C.—presumed his parents had a reason for wanting the child raised in the country, rather than the city. And still others surmised the child's moving north had something to do with the Second World War.

The truth seems to be more prosaic: His parents divorced, and his mother, based on letters she wrote Campbell when he was a grown man and remarks Campbell made to friends in Burlington, might not have been in a sufficiently healthy frame of mind to raise her boy on her own.

Trombley, however, might have been correct about Campbell's family being relatively well-off: The boy's grandfather, John J. Nash, patented a bullet casing machine.

In any case, the new kid in town carried himself with panache. "We used to call him the walking dictionary. He read *The New York Times* everyday, even in sixth grade, and it was like he wanted to keep up with the whole world -- not just little Bristol," Purinton-Ahlberg recalls. She went to Burlington concerts with Campbell on a bus that once linked the Addison County town with the Queen City when they were as young as 11. Though it was just the two of them, it certainly wasn't a date. But Purinton-Ahlberg says it was a testimony to the effect he had on grownups: Her mother liked Campbell and thought he was responsible. She could trust him with her daughter on a trip to a concert in a city 30 miles distant.

And unlike most of the boys in the class, Campbell could dance. Another classmate, Mary Dalton-Fleming, living now in Fort Myers, Fla., recalls how much he enjoyed music: "We had a ballroom dance class at school -- there was a little jitterbugging and tango, too -- and he liked that a lot."

Nevertheless, Purinton-Ahlberg also wonders if the boy's bravado wasn't a shield: "Maybe reading the newspaper and adding that 'esquire' to his name were a persona he built up because he was a little unsure of himself."

In a class photo from the sixth or seventh grade, Campbell is the shortest child in the back row: A boy with blond hair and bangs, a dimple and a charismatic smile. Of the five boys in the picture who are wearing check-plaid flannel shirts, he alone has buttoned his very top button.

Eventually Campbell rejoined his mother in Portsmouth, N.H., and graduated from high school there. He and his Bristol classmates lost touch, and the Campbell sightings they heard about in the late-1990s distressed them. Dalton-Fleming's daughter reported to her mother she had seen him in a diner in Bristol, and he didn't look well: He looked, in fact, "unhealthy." Someone told Purinton-Ahlberg that Campbell had been spied wandering aimlessly around Battery Park in what might have been a madman's gray wig. And Sam McKinnon, whose deceased son Tommy was a childhood friend of Campbell's, says that Campbell stopped by his house in Bristol in 1999 or 2000, and "he was a terrible-looking thing. We visited a bit, like we always did, but I wouldn't have been surprised if he'd been living in a van. He used to keep himself looking nice. No more."

None of his Bristol friends knew what he had been accomplishing as a photographer 30 years earlier.

After serving in the United States Army, he went to New York City, where according to Volino of COTS, he found work in a camera store. She presumes it was there that his interest in photography as a hobby grew into a career. Soon he was a regular in the city's music and theater circles. One day, he might be doing publicity photos or "headshots" for comedians Flip Wilson and David Steinberg; the next, he might be covering a Miles Davis jazz concert as a photojournalist. He also chronicled daily life in the city, using a large-format camera to capture hauntingly beautiful black-and-white images of kids playing street-ball and grownups playing chess.

In addition, Campbell worked as a stagehand in Manhattan, and would later tell Volino that he'd been a member of a theatrical union.

At some point in the early 1970s, he moved to Southern California. He might have followed a girlfriend there -- a dancer from the theater, Volino believes -- but he didn't stay long. Nor do many photographs from that period exist.

But a self-portrait that remains from the early 1970s shows a ruggedly good-looking man in his mid-30s. He is staring straight into the camera, his small grin slightly rakish. He is still wearing a check-plaid shirt, but this time that top button is open.

Volino and Rita Markley, executive director of COTS, can only conjecture about what precipitated Campbell's slide from a career as a successful photojournalist in Manhattan in the 1960s to arriving destitute at the COTS Daystation in Burlington in 1995. But Volino says that "instantly I enjoyed him. He was in Greenwich Village the same time I was, and he would say things like, 'You're a Pisces? You must be a dancer. Pisces have beautiful legs.'"

COTS placed Campbell in a single-room apartment in St. John's Hall, where he paid \$25 a month for the room and the shared kitchen facilities. The rest of the rent was paid by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Volino and Markley learned Campbell had suffered a serious stroke in the late 1980s that had left him hearing-impaired, unable to drive, and no longer fit to take pictures professionally. The key problem, Markley recalls, was that he was incapable of remaining focused on any one subject for more than a moment: "We'd be standing in St. John's, and he would say, 'Rita, these walls are 15 to 20 feet high. They're gallery walls. We need to open this space up to the public as a gallery.' Then he'd see a bike and suddenly he'd be talking about the bicycle repair business. And then, a moment later, he'd be re-enacting a scene from a 1940s movie. All our conversations were like that. They were all over the lot."

Professional follow-through was completely impossible for Campbell by the time he arrived in Burlington. "He tried to work," Volino remembers. "He wanted to go back to New York City, maybe rejoin the union, but he couldn't."

He also had eccentricities that might not have been debilitating, but were certainly time-consuming: Though he lived in Burlington, he preferred to drink the Bristol water of his childhood, and would venture to the Addison County village whenever someone would drive him so he could bring back water from a spring that had an outlet pipe just off Vermont 116.

Nevertheless, Volino and Markley could see the talented, perhaps brilliant, soul Campbell once had been. "His room," Volino says, "was filled with volumes of Shakespeare and Mark Twain. He loved classical music and jazz. He believed in making art and music and photography accessible."

They sensed the photographs and negatives he had saved had value, and encouraged him to show his work in Burlington. With their support, he was able to have a pair of photographs in a group show at the Firehouse Gallery, and they urged him to try to organize a solo show.

And then he died. He collapsed alone in a stairwell at St. John's in February 2002, a victim, apparently, of another stroke.

His friends at COTS didn't want Campbell buried in a pauper's grave. They remembered he had served in the Army, and thus coordinated his burial at the veterans' cemetery near Camp Johnson in Colchester.

But COTS also didn't want his work to be forgotten. In the autumn of 2002, his friends there contacted Dan Higgins, a photographer and professor of art at the University of Vermont, to see if there might be a student willing to examine the 2,000 negatives and prints they had discovered in boxes in Campbell's apartment. Higgins recommended Jessica Ferber, a photographer and sociology graduate from the class of 2002, who happened at the time to be working at PhotoGarden.

Ferber had never met Campbell, but when she saw his photographs, she was astonished. "I couldn't believe that his whole photographic collection might have wound up in a garbage can," she says. "He was so talented. Right away I could see that his photographs deserved to be noticed."

Ferber used a UVM darkroom to make contact sheets from the negatives so she could begin to archive what was there. As she worked, she determined that the photographs weren't simply valuable from a historic perspective, but as fine art as well: "He had a really good eye -- a personable eye. The composition and the subjects and the light are interesting. I like the way he never shot head-on."

Unfortunately, many of the negatives were badly damaged by water and wear. Consequently, she enlisted the help of Light-Works to restore the images. Owner Marty Feldman donated materials and his facilities, and Sharon Fosbrook, a digital imaging specialist at Light-Works and a photographer in her own right, scanned the negatives into a computer and used Photoshop software to restore them.

"I didn't change any of the images. I simply cloned out dust and scratches and imperfections," Fosbrook says.

The result was a small revelation: Photographs of an energetic Chuck Berry and a wistful Merlie Evers restored to their original glory, as well as poignant studies of Manhattan in transition in the 1960s and 1970s.

Ferber had heard that Campbell had wanted a solo show before he died, and so she curated a dozen photographs for a show at Halverson's Upstreet Cafe in Burlington. The work was on display there earlier this year.

Though she now lives in a Westchester suburb of New York City, Ferber is continuing to research Campbell's work. She has with her the thousands of his negatives and his notebooks, and hopes to publish a retrospective anthology of his photographs -- with a portion of the proceeds going to COTS.

In the last years of his life, Campbell took few pictures. But he helped decorate St. John's Hall for Christmas with his friend Ken Lawless, he drank coffee with pals at Uncommon Grounds, and he offered advice to fledging photographers in the area. He went to Bristol in search of memories and water.

And he had a roof over his head, despite the infirmities that dogged him at the end.

This Christmas, COTS expects there will be at least 50 people visiting their Daystation. Most likely, every bed at the Waystation will be taken -- all 36 of them. In addition, there will be 40 or 45 people living at the two family shelters, including children, and all the apartment complexes where COTS has affordable housing will be full.

The COTS mission isn't about preserving photography. In Bob Campbell's case, that was just a bonus.