

LORI WASELCHUK GRACE BEFORE DYING

An Interview by Susan Burnstine



Many photographers aspire to inform and encourage change through their photography, but not everyone has the tenacity to make this desire a reality. In the case of Lori Waselchuk, her devotion to educating and promoting change through her images has excelled on every level.

Waselchuk's series *Grace Before Dying* is a powerful and poignant exploration of the nationally recognized prison hospice program where volunteers and patients are serving long-term prison sentences at the Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola. The program was created in 1998 at the request of Warden Burl Cain who began the program when he arranged for hospice trainers to train the inmates. The hospice program was subsequently supervised by the first coordinator Melody Eschete and is now run by another nurse, Stacy Falgout. Since its inception the program has helped transform one of the most violent maximum-security prisons in the South into one of the least violent maximum-security prisons in the United States.

Waselchuk photographed the hospice program for two and-a-half years intensively then embarked on an ambitious traveling show that was exhibited at correctional facilities in Mississippi and Louisiana. She's won countless awards for this body of work including, The PhotoNola Review Prize in 2007, the 2008 Distribution Grant from the Documentary Photography Project of the Open Society Institute, the 2009 Individual Photographer Fellowship from the Aaron Siskind Foundation, and the 2010 Publishing Initiative Grant from the Louisiana Endowment for Humanities. Additionally, she was also a finalist for the 2008 Aperture West Book Prize and was nominated for the Santa Fe Prize for Photography in 2009.

SB: [How long have you been involved in photography?](#)

LW: I've been working as a photographer since 1990 after I graduated with a B.A. in Journalism from the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis. My first job was a staff photographer at The Baton Rouge Advocate. I loved working as a daily newspaper photographer because it enabled me to really get to know a city; it's people and the issues that affected them.

Even while working as a daily newspaper photographer, I always had ideas for more in-depth projects. I was lucky to work for photo editors that encouraged me to work on self-assigned photo stories and essays for the newspaper. I was also lucky to work during a time in the industry where there was space to publish photo stories. So in addition to my daily assignments, I always made time to work on long-term projects.

This practice continued even after I became a freelance photojournalist - I would work on projects in-between my assignments. I am drawn to look at issues or subjects for a long period. The study and conversations that are made during a documentary project, allow me to build relationships and increase my understanding of the subject. I have always wanted my photographs to be made from an informed and empathetic place.

My introduction to the Angola prison hospice program came from a magazine assignment to photograph the program. The magazine, *Imagine Louisiana*, was a small publication that focused on philanthropy in the state. While making pictures for the magazine, I became very inspired and intrigued by the inmate hospice caregivers and I asked for permission to continue documenting the program.

I spent two and half years visiting the prison. I would go whenever I received permission to visit. There were months when I could not get in, but I never stopped asking for permission to return. I guess I felt compelled to tell this remarkable story about the inmate volunteers' remarkable courage and empathy. I mean, these are men that society has decided to lock up for life. They do not have social worth in the free world. But I have learned many lessons from the unflinching

care and love they give to their fellow inmates and I am honored to share what I've learned through the photographs.

SB: Your photographs are so powerful and intimate, yet I suspect you had to maintain a respectful distance to your subjects due to the subject matter and location.

LW: One of the things that drives my documentary work is my interest in others. I feel very comfortable with almost anyone who allows me to photograph them. But I am always trying to be aware of the comfort level of the person I am photographing. In the prison, I got as close as the inmates allow me to get. And because I kept coming back and demonstrated my commitment to photographing their program, the volunteers became invested in the photo project as well.

SB: Can you discuss any of the patients or volunteers you may have become particularly close to?

LW: I came to love the patients and volunteers that I spent time with. I think I have become closest to the hospice volunteer quilters because I continue to collaborate with them for traveling shows. They have made four quilts that now show with two separate exhibitions.

SB: Are the volunteers also lifers who have health problems or are they healthy and just trying to make a difference?

LW: Great question. The volunteers are healthy. They do want to make a difference. They never want another inmate to die alone and uncared for at Angola. They also know that their work and commitment to the hospice program now, helps secure the program for the future - when they may get sick one day. It's a type of insurance for them to. Ultimately though, the inmate volunteers realize that their work as hospice caregivers has helped them grow as human beings as well as help them come to terms with their own regrets and fears.

SB: Can you discuss the traveling exhibition?

LW: I knew that I wanted to create an exhibition and I applied to The Documentary Photography Project of the Open Society Institute for a Distribution Grant. It wasn't until I sat down to write the grant did I fully form the idea to make this a show that travels to prisons. Once I decided on who the intended audience would be, I knew that the installation had to be simple, transportable and durable. With those criteria, the first thought was to research the displays used in commercial trade shows - which in the end turned out to be nearly perfect.

The great thing about the Distribution Grant (now called the Audience Engagement Grant) http://www.soros.org/initiatives/photography/focus_areas/engagement/guidelines is that they require you to partner with an organization that can provide additional support. This is a brilliant strategy. I partnered with the Louisiana-Mississippi Hospice and Palliative Care Organization (LMHPCO). That organization has been enormously supportive in traveling the exhibition, publicizing, and utilizing it for their own work. The LMHPCO provides the training courses for regional prisons trying to initiate their own hospice programs. It was a big relief to have created this exhibition with a partner organization. After dedicating six months to working exclusively on this project, I had neither energy nor resources to promote and travel the exhibition. I needed to go back to paid work. In hindsight, I have realized that OSI's proposal guidelines and requirements helped me to create a powerful and sustainable project.

I also received help from graphic designer, Phil Molay of Moonshine Studio. We collaborated on the panel designs, but he did all the really difficult layout and production work. The Louisiana State Prison Museum planned and paid for the exhibit's launch at Angola prison. Since the launch April 3rd, 2009, the traveling exhibit has appeared in correctional facilities in Louisiana and Mississippi. It will continue to travel to prisons through September. It has also been shown to the public at several venues including the New Orleans Museum of Art and the New Orleans Public Library. It traveled to Denver CO to be part of the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization's annual conference. Later this year, I'll be working on setting up a national tour (2011-12) of the exhibit. I want to keep it a grassroots operation, showing in nontraditional venues like libraries, schools, museums, and (of course) prisons. If people are interested in hosting the exhibit, they can go to the gracebeforedying.org website or email me at lori@loriwaselchuckphotos.com. There is a calendar on the website.

SB: Can you discuss the quilts made by the Angola Prison Hospice Quilters that are displayed in the exhibitions?

The Angola prison hospice volunteers began making quilts to raise money for the hospice program. Most of the members of the inaugural class of certified volunteers contributed to their first quilt, a commemorate patchwork made in 2000, honoring the program's first years. That quilt is still displayed in the hospice chapel adjacent to the prison's hospital wards. During the early quilting years, a small group of volunteers made one or two quilts to raffle at the annual Angola Prison Rodeo. Today there are two small groups of hospice volunteers making quilts year round for raffles, sales and for the hospice patients' beds. With the funds raised, the volunteers paint and furnish the isolation cells that now serve as the hospice patients' rooms. They buy coffee pots, radios, books, DVD players, TVs for the rooms. They also buy comfort items like special foods, sweat pants, and slippers for the patients.

The quilters have become accomplished at their craft and their quilts are now winning awards in art competitions outside the prison. The quilts represent the inmates' dedication to improving their hospice program, as well as their journey to grow as creative and compassionate people.

SB: Have you witnessed any changes or positive effects on others within the prison system or outside of the system due to this series being on exhibition?

LW: The exhibit generates a lot of discussion, emotion and thought. I think at Angola, the compassion and power of the hospice program was made plain to viewers. It strengthened their mission and helped gain support for their program.

SB: What are you working on now?

LW: I have just completed a year of shooting my project about the bridges of New Orleans. I began this project during the evacuation of New Orleans, before during and after Hurricane Katrina. I've photographed in communities that are geographically defined by the city's bridges. I have also tried to document the impact that these massive structures have on community and landscape. The project has taken many turns over the nearly five years that I've worked on it, so I am currently trying to edit the photographs. I am also showing the work to editors and curators to see if there is interest in it. My last year of shooting was supported through a generous grant from the Baton Rouge Area Foundation.

To view more of Lori's work:

<http://www.loriwaselchuckphotos.com/>

<http://www.gracebeforedying.org/>

Susan Burnstine is an award winning fine art and commercial photographer originally from Chicago now based in Los Angeles. Susan is represented in galleries across the country, widely published throughout the world and has also written for several photography magazines, including a monthly column for Black and White Photography Magazine (UK). Nominated for the 2009 Santa Fe Prize for Photography and winner of various awards including B&W Magazine's 2008 Portfolio Spotlight Award.

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