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Cal Poly Professor, Student Help Prepare Smithsonian Institution Exhibit

SAN LUIS OBISPO – A Cal Poly professor and grad student are part of a team helping to prepare a collection of photos for The Smithsonian.

Cal Poly Archivist Intern Erin Newman (left) and attorney Evanne Levin with photos heading for the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African History and Culture

Veteran photographer Joe Schwartz, 97, is preparing a collection of his images for a new Smithsonian Institution museum. Harvey Levenson, the head of Cal Poly's Graphic Communication Department, and Erin Newman, a history student who has interned in Cal Poly's Special Collections and the History Center of San Luis Obispo County, are part of the team helping to assess Schwartz's work and organize the collection in preparation for shipment to the Smithsonian Institution.

Levenson, who is serving as liaison between Schwartz and the institution, also co-coordinated the publication of Schwartz's 2000 book "Folk Photography – Poems I've Never Written," which initially drew the attention of the Smithsonian.

Schwartz's photography documenting the have-nots of the U.S. between 1930 and 1980 will become the premier permanent

exhibit at the new Smithsonian Institution National Museum of African History and Culture, which is under construction now.

Levenson called Schwartz an amazing man with the drive and vitality of someone decades younger.

“He continues to be concerned and involved with issues of fairness, justice and equal opportunity for all humankind, as he has been since he grew up in Brooklyn, seeing firsthand the inequities of society – and particularly their focus on African-Americans,” Levenson said. “His photographs tell the story of how, with compassion, sensitivity to people’s feelings, and common sense, we can all get along.”

Newman is working with Miriam Katz, a photo archivist from Los Angeles and Evanne Levin, a Los Angeles-based intellectual property attorney. James Miller, professor of English and American Studies and chair of the American Studies Department of The George Washington University in Washington, D.C., is advising the Smithsonian on the link between each of Schwartz’ images and the museum’s theme.

The museum aims to reveal how African-American history and culture are at the center of American history and how they in many ways represent the quintessential American story. Curator Paul Gardullo, who recently interviewed Schwartz in Atascadero, said Schwartz’s photography is deeply aligned with the museum’s mission.

“We see his body of work as a unique and rich artistic and social contribution that adds to our collection and showcases the tremendous diversity of the African-American and the American experience,” Gardullo said. “When our museum opens in 2015, we see Schwartz’s work having an important place in several of our permanent exhibitions, particularly in profiling the lives of often forgotten people and communities engaged in interracial cooperation in the face of segregation and racism.”

Photography will be a major part of the museum’s permanent collections and will include work from Ernest Withers, Wayne F. Miller, Henry Clay Anderson, Leonard Freed and others. This center will also comprise strong online, publication and research components with potential to generate traveling exhibitions and publications.

Schwartz, who now lives in Atascadero, Calif., is also being featured in a documentary about The Photo League – an organization of New York City photographers in the 1930s and ’40s devoted to documenting life in the city’s working-class neighborhoods – being produced by the Columbus (Ohio) Museum of Art.

For more information about Cal Poly’s role in the Smithsonian project, contact Levenson at 805-756-6151; hlevenso@calpoly.edu.

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