

**A Month with the Karen:  
A People's Struggle Told Through the Eyes of a Missionary**

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## ABSTRACT

The goal of this project is to effectively document the work of a missionary in order to bring awareness to his or her work as a missionary and as a humanitarian in general. Not only do I want to bring awareness, but I would also like to spark interest of that work in a large audience of viewers. I am interested in capturing the full spectrum of missionary work and being able to convey the work in a coherent way. I will use the photographs of other great humanitarians, photojournalists, and documentary photographers as examples. The photographs that I will use for this project were taken in Thailand and Burma this past summer, as I spent a month immersed in the work of a missionary to the Karen people. The images captured on this expedition will be printed and displayed at the Kennedy Library. The theme of this event will be to present the work of a missionary among the Karen people in Thailand and Burma in a way that conveys that missionaries are humanitarians of love and peace and not solely preachy gospel mongers. A secondary theme is bringing awareness to the plight of the Karen people in Thailand and Burma. This project marks the beginning of my career as a documentary photographer in the mission field.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

### Statement of the Problem:

Since the work of a missionary is often emotional and encompasses multiple areas of humanitarian effort, the problem lies in relaying the emotional strain and stress of the subjects, while showing all the areas of relief that the missionary provides. Another problem is trying to relay the story of the plight of the Karen in a way that people can grasp. The Karen people have been in a civil war with the Burmans for over 60 years, yet few even know who the Karen people are. Therefore, to show the importance of the missionary who serves among the Karen people, one must first understand the history and current state of the Karen people. Each image must be multifaceted and coherent to the viewer. To fully comprehend how to do such photography, I had to study the work of photographers who do similar work, such as: photojournalists, documentary photographers, and photographers who work for missionary organizations.

### Purpose or Objective of the Study:

The purpose of my study is to create effective documentary photography in which the viewer becomes engaged and can comprehend the story that I wish to portray. The goal was not only to tell a comprehensive story, but to do so in such a way that the viewer can retain a connection to the story my photographs present after he or she is no longer in front of the printed imagery. I will create an exhibition using still photography and other exciting media to stimulate interest in and relate the story of the missionary photographed. Other media will include audio interviews and written stories of the Karen people to whom the missionary ministers.

## Limitations of the Study:

There were many restrictions in this whole assignment. First was the process of finding a missionary to photograph under the terms I presented. I did have terms to which I wished to photograph my subject. My terms included traveling to the subject without the hindrance of a large foreign group. Most organizations and churches wanted to send me with a team, which I felt would hinder my effort to capture the missionary and her work in a natural state. Once this was accomplished, there was the process of obtaining money to go all the way to Thailand. This was solved by coming alongside my home church and sending out support letters that included my purpose and the benefits of my journey. The last limitation before actually getting into the country was communication about my location. Communication with the missionary that I would be shadowing was limited, so study about the areas I was to visit were unknown. This presented the problem of not having a clear back-story to my subjects or general history or current state of my subjects. Essentially I was thrown into the assignment totally ignorant to precise objectives.

Once I did get into Thailand there was the problem of getting the whole story. Since much of the work is done in Burma, and it is illegal for any foreigner to get to the areas that would tell the complete story, I had to be creative with how I could tell the story of the Karen people from Burma in Thailand. Also, much of the work done by the missionary is done in Burma, but due to the current state of Burma it is extremely risky to cross the border. There was not only risk to my life, but also to the lives of the people inhabiting the villages to be visited that

would tell the whole story. Even entering parts of Thailand had to be cleared by the Thai government before I could visit. Some I was able to visit and other places I was denied entry. This definitely narrowed my story, so I had to make the most of the situations I was presented with.

All of these limitations gave me a real-life photo-assignment experience that will prepare me for future assignments' limitations. They gave me future knowledge and skills that will prepare me for my future career as a missionary photojournalist.

#### Glossary of Terms:

Burma- The state west of Thailand that is currently most often referred to on maps as the Union of Myanmar.

Karen- A people group in the Union of Myanmar (Burma). They are the largest ethnic minority, second in population only to the Burmans.

Burmans- The ethnic majority in the Union of Myanmar (Burma). They are the ruling authority in the state.

Missionary- Someone sent in order to promote a religion. Often referring to one sent by the Christian religion.

Humanitarian- A person benefitting the welfare of humans.

## CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF RESEARCH

Since I was young, I have been heavily involved in my church community. I can recall times of sitting in church services watching slideshows of missionaries and their work. The problem I saw was that no one was paying attention, and for good reason. The images shown were snapshots of their ministry that were simply images of documentation. They were not images relaying an emotional connection to the American viewer. How could they know how to accomplish this? These were people who have been so far disconnected from American culture for so long that they did not know what Americans relate to. From this realization on, my goal has been to fix this problem and bring excitement to missions through proper and effective photography of missionary work.

The first missionary I was able to visit, and the subject for my senior project, is a missionary to the Karen people. So, first I had to research who the Karen people are and who this missionary is in order to photograph this assignment successfully. Let me first begin with the Karen people.

The Karen are the largest ethnic minority in the state of Burma. They have been involved in a civil war with the Burmans since the 1940's. The Burmans' hatred for the Karen people can be traced back much further than this, but we will begin here. Since the Burmans gained independence from Great Britain, the ruling military junta has been trying to cleanse their nation of the Karen race. In 1997, the attacks increased dramatically when the Burman government agreed to build a pipeline from Burma to Thailand for the benefit of two American and French oil companies. Since that time the Karen (including the missionary visited and her village) have fled

into Thailand, have been under Burman oppression, or are Internally Displaced People (IDP's). The Burmans' goal is to wipe out every Karen in the Burma state before their election in 2010. This very brief summary of the history of the Karen people brings us to the work of the missionary herself.

The missionary has been involved with the Karen since 1985. As mentioned before, the missionary and her village fled into Thailand in 1997, which created the ministry she has currently inherited. Her ministry includes work in Thailand and Burma since the Karen have been forced to flee in both states. The ministry can be broken into several different categories: patients requiring medical attention, IDP's, children, elderly, mentally disabled, and refugee camps. Since there is not much information about Karen history or the work of my missionary in particular, much of the research was done while in Thailand and Burma.

Before I left I was looking at the work of other photojournalists and fine art documentary photographers. This would help me focus on what the top photographers in the world are doing to convey their stories. I looked at the work of Phil Borges and spoke on the phone with him about how he gets his work out there. I did the same with Matt Powell, who photographs for a Christian organization called Samaritan's Purse. Both conversations helped me to get focused on my goal. I also began to look at the work of top photojournalists such as those in VII Photography. This organization includes the work of James Nachtwey and Marcus Bleasdale. Through looking at their work I could see the importance of light. In their photographs light tended to highlight the important aspects of the picture. I wondered how they were able to accomplish this in their fast action photographs, but while in Thailand and Burma, I was able to see the light if I



looked for it. Also, the reassurance that blurry photographs were not always throwaways was an encouraging thought while out in the field.

After this month-long stay in Thailand and Burma I had to figure out an effective way to share all that I have learned. My goal was to show all the different ministries of the missionary, while also portraying the plight of the Karen people who are in desperate need of helping hands and their culture as it would be without the oppression of the Burmans. This goal could only be accomplished in materials, good concise writings and mixed media. So, upon my return to the states I began to research printing papers and how to hang them, audio devices, and how to be an effective, concise writer.

### CHAPTER III: PROCEDURES AND RESULTS

Upon my return to the States, the research began. The initial thought for printing the project was to do so on Karen cloth I obtained in Thailand in order to tie my viewers into the people and their arts and traditions. This proved to be impossible. The fabric was not bleach-able or printable. I presented the problem to Sky Bergman, my project advisor, and I explained the connection to the culture that I wanted to create with my prints. She suggested that I find a natural looking, hand-made paper. She further suggested that I contact Light Institute in Los Osos to see if they had any suggestions for materials. They helped me find some paper samples from a store in Santa Monica called Hiromi Paper. The collaborative decision was a hand-made Japanese paper. The next issue was figuring out how to print on this paper.

The company said that the paper was a “digital paper”, meaning that it can be printed upon, but I had my doubts. Light institute helped me come up with a print profile that would work. This was scary to me because the paper was so fibrous that it could have had the issue of bleeding and therefore causing the illusion of blurry images. Luckily the end result was not so blurry and the only quality loss was in the shadows. Since we did not want bleeding to occur and because the paper was super absorbent, the blacks printed light and an overall loss of detail was apparent. I believe this loss of quality was worth the overall effect of the medium. The end result was a natural looking paper that linked the viewer to the natural and simplistic culture of the Karen people. The images were then sprayed with an archival spray to insure that the prints did not fade over time.

During the process of finding the right paper I had the issue of selecting the right images

and deciding what words to use to tell a story along with the images. The idea I came up with was literally writing out the story I wanted to tell about my journey in a way that covered all the categories of the missionary's work. So, I wrote out a story about the Karen culture and then dove into the different ministries of the missionary. My initial ideal was to just display the story line below the images. However, this seemed to be too distracting from my images. My solution was to line up the images in an appropriate order that would tell the story I wrote and then divide up the story into segments to be displayed above the images. This is exactly what I did. This process gave a good flow to my exhibition, where people could subconsciously follow a story through images, text, and audio media.

The next challenge was finding a way to play back audio clips on headphones within the gallery space. I had interviews of the people in my images, and I wanted a way to allow people to listen to the subjects pictured and their translator in order to draw a closer connection between the viewer and the people I visited. I looked at simple sound-byte players, and although they were cheaper, they only played back short twenty-second clips. This was not good enough for me. The thought of just placing small stereos on tables occurred to me, but that could lead to theft of this particular object and it would be too distracting having a table blocking the viewer from my images. In the end, I used three digital audio recorders, bolted them to the wall of the gallery space, and put instructions for playback. Using audio recorders, like the one I actually used on location, gave the feel of being there as the interviews were being conducted. It also brought a closer connection to the viewer and their overall experience.

The final challenge was finding a gallery space on campus to host the exhibition. I con-

tacted my two options, the Kennedy Library and the University Union. The University Union did not get back to me for weeks, so I had one option, the library. After discussing gallery spaces within the library with Catherine Trujillo, there was only one slot open in the gallery space under the stairwell on the first floor of the library. It was sooner than I had hoped, but I was able to pull together all that was necessary for the opening of the show. The library became a decent space to show since it gathered students who would become curious after initially passing by. All in all the show collected a good response with interests in the subject presented. It brought awareness to the issue of the persecuted Karen and the work of the missionary.

## CHAPTER IV: SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The exhibition was an overall success. I am still learning how to photograph and present my images in effective ways, but I believe what I did come up with on my first attempt at this type of photography was successful. There was a great response from my spectators, and people who were unaware of the Karen situation seemed to be enlightened after viewing my exhibition. I learned a lot from the process of finding proper materials, constructing the exhibition, and finding gallery spaces to exhibit. I now have more of an idea of where to look for materials, and where to begin in constructing an exhibition. Local businesses and institutions are very willing to help in the process. The whole search for materials became a countywide collaboration. It was very helpful writing out the story that I wanted to tell my audience, and I believe this is a great method for constructing exhibitions in the future. Finding gallery spaces is not simple, but now I know it takes a lot of initiative and self-motivation. The only way to make a gallery exhibition is putting myself out there and presenting galleries with their expected criteria. Rejection only means that it is not the right venue, but there is a right fit out there for me.

I now know after critiques from a local photographer that my work, although good for student work, could use some refining. It was suggested that I step back from my subjects to incorporate more of a scene to further the story of individuals photographed. Another observation was that portraits can be within larger settings. They are not solely shot as close-ups in horizontal fashion. This was an applicable suggestion that I will take to heart on my next excursion. After this discussion with the local photographer, I would highly recommend, not only looking at others' work analytically, but discussing others work with them. It is a great help to find out the

process of those who are veterans in the field I am going into.

Finally, although exhibitions are a great way to spread awareness about the topics of my work, they are not necessarily the best option. I would like to expand my audience, so I plan to contact magazines to publish my work. This will be a whole new task to experience and learn from, but will benefit my future endeavors. Also, I plan to do more exhibitions of this work. This process is still taking place, but is slowly moving toward future showings.

PHOTOGRAPHY RESEARCH EXAMPLES



Photograph by Matt Powell



Photograph by Marcus Bleasdale



Photograph by Phil Borges



Photograph by James Nachtwey



## DOCUMENTATION OF THE EXHIBITION





**A MONTH WITH THE KAREN**

*A people's struggle told through the eyes of a missionary*

FEAST FLOOR  
KENNEDY LIBRARY  
CAL POLY

**A PHOTOGRAPHY EXHIBITION  
PRESENTED BY GORDON GRIFFITH  
OCT. 23 - NOV. 10  
ARTIST GATHERING OCTOBER 26**

The Karen have been in a civil war with the Burmese Military Junta for over 40 years. They spend most of their lives fleeing through the jungle or attempting to establish themselves in foreign lands. Their story is one of perseverance and bravery among injustice.

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