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Cover Story

“Just Down the Road”

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Photo exhibit reveals unseen Alabamians

By: **Glenny Brock**

The familiarity of the faces that fill each frame in “Just Down the Road” accounts for most of what makes this photo exhibit so engaging. Comprised of more than two dozen pictures taken in Jefferson and Walker County, the show — which opens on Tuesday, April 7, at the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute — is a documentary project with the feel of a family album: A woman cradles her toddler daughter in her arms as the child gazes intently out the window of the trailer that the family calls home; a smiling father tries to make room in his lap for his three clowning children, all under the age of 10; a little boy alone on a couch in a sparse, clean room beams at the camera, proudly pretending to read a book.



Although the pictures were shot by an experienced photojournalist, they have an intriguing snapshot quality — not because any of the subjects was caught unaware, but because almost every one is in an environment that is so rarely captured in professional portraiture. These are not only pictures of people but pictures of place — the ground around a trailer is covered with trash and toys jumbled together; a kitchen transformed by necessity into a child’s bedroom so the microwave is situated above an overflowing bin of toys and a Spider-man pillow sits below a countertop crowded with Crisco, Reynolds Wrap and Sunbeam white bread; a sagging front porch swept clean even though the house appears to be sinking.

Some people will see these images as pictures of poverty. And they will not be wrong — what the people in every photo have in common is that at least one member of the family is enrolled in a program called First Teachers@Home, run by the RUSH (Rural and Urban Self Help) Initiative. The RUSH Initiative is a grassroots, community-driven, non-profit organization based in Birmingham, with an explicit mission “to help stop the inter-generational poverty that infects our landscape.”

The organization was founded in 2001 as an outgrowth of a faith-based organization in Sumiton, Ala. RUSH began with a school-based medical clinic in Graysville and later established a school-based therapy program at Brookville Elementary School in Jefferson County. By 2003, the whole program moved to Sumiton, in Walker County, where it was headquartered until 2008. During the years in Graysville, Brookville and Sumiton, RUSH staffers observed that children from lower-income families started kindergarten testing and performing 18-24 months behind middle-class children because their parents weren’t teaching them skills necessary to start school. A family literacy preschool program was established to address these issues, and that program eventually evolved into First Teachers@Home, which goes beyond literacy education and addresses “overwhelming mental health issues seen among families living in poverty,” including discipline and behavioral issues.

“The program teaches parents how to teach their children,” says photographer Gary Tramontina. A Pittsburgh native and a current resident of Birmingham who has earned a living as a photographer since 1982, Tramontina traveled with RUSH Initiative president Susan Swartz to meet these families and chronicle their lives.

“As I saw their homes and heard their stories, I knew I could put their faces in front of people who might not otherwise ever see them,” Tramontina says.

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Tramontina's work has appeared in the *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, *Time* and *USA Today*, covering such subjects as the Sept. 11 crash of United Flight 93 and the world's first successful cross-species organ transplant. The RUSH pictures, however, represented new territory for Tramontina.

"To do what I do, I have to disassociate myself from what I'm seeing," he explains. "That wasn't the case in taking these pictures. It was something far different than an impersonal assignment or even shooting breaking news. I felt I was invited there and I felt I was privileged to be there."

When the photographs were shown at a gallery earlier this year, as part of fundraiser for the RUSH Initiative, Tramontina was unaccustomed to seeing his work displayed and to seeing so much of it at once.

"It was definitely a new experience for me," he says. "I'm used to my work being temporary. You know, there might be one on a page – it's in a newspaper or magazine and then it's gone. These photos, by comparison, have a lot of longevity to this point. And I know that that is due in part to the subject matter, to what they show."

Inevitably, this exhibit calls to mind James Agee and Walker Evans' 1941 *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, a prose-and-pictures documentary profile of white sharecroppers in the South. The duo's original assignment was to create "photographic and verbal record of the daily living and environment of an average white family of tenant farmers." The point, I think, of "Just Down the Road" is not merely to highlight the poverty or its proximity (although that title's unequivocal) but to reveal the people in exquisite, intimate detail.

"These people about whom I'm passionate, Gary shows them as human," says RUSH president Susan Swartz. "That's not how people usually see people in poverty."

Swartz notes that Tramontina's approach to the project was to capture what the people's lives really look like.

"Poverty in person looks very different than we imagine it will," Swartz says. "Gary was very mindful of being respectful of these families. He engaged with them on a personal level and that's evident when you look at the pictures. The gracefulness when he shoots is impressive because he observes without intruding."

Tramontina is modest about the images. He approached the assignment with curiosity and compassion, he says, and simply hopes that the pictures compel those who see them to feel something about the people portrayed.

"I give credit to the families for what's in the pictures," Tramontina says. "I just happened to be there with the camera."

"Just Down the Road" will be on display in the Park Gallery Hall at the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute beginning Tuesday, April 7. The show runs through June 28. For more information, call (205) 328-9696 or visit www.bcri.org

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