

Mikki Harris
“Bringing People Into a Moment”

AUNT CHLOE: As a multimedia journalist, what other media besides photography do you utilize to tell your stories, and how do you decide what elements best complement your story?

HARRIS: I have been a storyteller my entire life, always conveying a message by bringing people into a space or moment through a story that I tell. At twenty-six years old, I purchased a Canon Elan 7E camera, and began using the camera to capture storytelling moments on film. I had no idea what the camera settings should be, so my focus was on releasing the shutter at the moments that I anticipated would capture the essence of what was taking place. Those moments that I would have shared verbally, but now was sharing visually. Twenty years later, I know my strength in storytelling is visual storytelling, but I use still photos, video, audio, data and/or words to bring people in. The decision on what elements should be used for the story is made by asking, “who is the audience, what do I want to convey, how should viewers be engaged, and is there something I want them to do with the information?” Another driver of multimedia elements is what platform the story will be published [on]. A story told to a captive audience in a room is much different than an individual watching a story through a Virtual Reality headset in her home. I love having the freedom to select what storytelling elements to use, coupled with the creative space to present a user experience that goes outside of a traditional platform to read or view a story.

AUNT CHLOE: When taking photographs of people, are there certain types of moments, actions, or emotions that you attempt to capture?

HARRIS: When I capture documentary photographs of people, I look to capture who people are at core, who they are as human beings. It can be difficult, because the external, i.e. the attire, the accessories, are an expression of who we are or want to be, and the neighborhood we live informs us, but clothes and a street don’t define us. As a photojournalist, I work to get access to people. I talk with people and spend as much time as possible understanding who people are before I pick up the camera, so that when I capture their response to a situation, I am capturing who this person is. Ideally, I capture strength-based characteristics that allow the viewer to see this person in an authentic way that can connect them via the human condition. A caregiver, a leader, a motivator, someone who is determined, hard-working, grieving, joyous, learning, living, surviving. When covering challenging stories like border crossing from Mexico into the US, or post-hurricane stories, I think about myself or a family member in a person’s situation so that I can be both compassionate and respectful of the people whose lives I am documenting. When covering an event, I look to document not only the action, but the reaction to what is taking place. It could be a protest, or a sports event, where conversation is limited or not an option, but as a photojournalist I have to read behaviors, anticipate action, and capture the

moments that share all the emotions that are seen, heard, and felt because of what is taking place.

AUNT CHLOE: What photographers or photojournalists have inspired you? Why?

HARRIS: As a journalism graduate student, I participated in a number of photojournalism workshops that introduced me to top photojournalists throughout the world. In 2004, I traveled to D.C. for the American Society of Newspaper Editors conference, where Pablo Martínez Monsiváis was my editor for the week, assigning me stories, features, and mentoring along the way. Pablo is a Pulitzer Prize-winning photojournalist who works for the Associated Press (AP). His story is one I connect to, as he is from an immigrant family, and his work ethic and family story reminded me of my father and his family. During that week in D.C., Pablo invited a group of us to what I thought was an unofficial ASNE networking event in Columbia Heights. When our group of student photojournalists showed up, we entered a casual, low-key going-away party that was being held for Sharon Farmer. At the time, Sharon was leaving the AP to be John Kerry's photographer while on the campaign trail. I had never met Sharon, but knew of her. Sharon had been the director of White House photography under Bill Clinton. The first woman and first Black person to hold this position. But Sharon didn't talk about photos, history-making career accomplishments, or politics at this event. She was playing the bass guitar, and welcomed us to what felt like a jam session for a whole bunch of AP photographers and their friends. Six years later, I cold-called Sharon, asked if she would join my photo team to cover the National Urban League, and from that point on, Sharon became not only someone whose work I knew, but she became a true friend and mentor. Sharon is an inspiration because of the person she is. She motivates, encourages, protects and is an example for all photojournalists.

That week with ASNE connected me to a number of "Greats in Photojournalism." One night I entered a dinner that was taking place, and the only open seats were at a table close to the stage with an AP editor I had talked with earlier. He motioned for me to join them, and I sat down. The program hadn't started, so I had casual conversation with the people sitting on my right and left. The man on my left was Alan. The man on my right was Nick. I didn't know their last names, but learned they were photojournalists. Alan started talking about one of his stories from four years prior in Miami, where he had to operate on keen observation and instincts. As he described his time on this "stakeout story" I started visualizing where he was, and was suddenly brought to Miami, the home where five year-old Elian Gonzalez was seized by [U.S.] Border Patrol agents in 2000. This Alan was Alan Díaz. Alan captured the image of Elian that was viewed by the world. Nick was nodding his head, and both Nick and Alan gave me advice that I hold onto and share with students today. Nick handed me his business card, and this Nick was Nick Ut, the Pulitzer Prize-winning photojournalists whose image "Napalm Girl" from Vietnam let the world know of the horrors of the war. I knew Nick not by name, but by the story. He captured images [of events] that the world had not imagined were taking place. And his instincts as a human helped the young napalm girl, Phan Thị Kim Phúc, get medical treatment at

a hospital in Saigon. I share Nick's work with students today, where we have discussions on the responsibility of the storyteller and human being.

AUNT CHLOE: How has the advent of digital photography impacted photojournalism? Is your preference for film or digital photography? Why?

HARRIS: Film photography pushes a photojournalist to be intentional and patient, as one roll of film holds 36 frames, and takes time to develop. You have to truly function in that Henri Cartier-Bresson "decisive moment" to capture images on film, which does make you a better photographer. Digital photography was introduced to many local photojournalists during the 1996 Olympic Games. In the early 2000s, you could enter a newsroom and find both film and digital loyalists on the photo staff. By the time I entered the newsroom in 2004, everyone was using digital, and sharing stories on how faster the workflow was, and how much shorter the deadlines were because of digital. My time with film has only been as a hobbyist, and time with digital is as a professional. I prefer digital photography as I work on current projects and deadlines. Speed and cost are two big factors that have me lean toward digital, but my preference for digital is because it connects to my interest in innovation, and the use of technology to tell stories in more dynamic ways.

Here's a story that could only be done digitally. It's a film and discussion on Protest:
<https://vimeo.com/539284777>

PROTEST. A Crown Forum Experience is 360 Degrees. Storytelling and perspective.

Professor Mikki Harris and Morehouse alumnus Brooklen McCarty '19 present a story of protest in three acts.

Act I -The Protest

Act II -The Conversation

Act III-The Glee Club

Watch this video with a VR headset, or on a mobile device with headphones, and move your device to see the visuals in 360 degrees.

Context, perspective, and compassion play a role in shaping stories of impact.

AUNT CHLOE: In the context of photojournalism, is your work subjective or objective? Discuss the importance of objectivity and subjectivity as it pertains to photojournalism. Is true objectivity realistic or even desirable?

HARRIS: My work is subjective. Photojournalism is always subjective. We have a choice and have to make the decision to point a camera in a specific direction, which means we are

shaping the story out of what is surrounding us. But there is responsible subjectivity, where you capture the truth, you shape the story in a way that does not deceive the truth. I don't know what true objectivity is in photojournalism. Even if I hold a 360-degree camera to capture what is surrounding me, I have control over when the camera begins to record footage, I can start and stop the recording so that it takes in sound at specific moments, and the place that I choose to stand does not fully capture every moment and vantage point. As storytellers, we have tremendous power and responsibility in the stories that we tell. We all must acknowledge that power and responsibility and think about the impact that the moments we capture can have.

AUNT CHLOE: In 2019, you co-founded the Atlanta Drone Lab. What interests you most about using drones as a means of visual storytelling? Are there any specific locations that you hope to capture via drone in the future?

HARRIS: Drone storytelling allows the storyteller to share information from a new perspective, and it allows the viewer to process information in a way that our eye doesn't typically see. Drones give us a strong visual sense of place, and can also provide a different kind of context as we see adjacent spaces from the sky. I have drone footage in a current documentary that I am working on to show protected communal land that developers are working hard to steal, profit from, and control. The aerial perspective allows the viewer to see how expansive the land is, and its relation to the village of people who have communally owned the land for hundreds of years. The view can stir something inside a person; it can be emotional, it can be thought-provoking, and it can allow the person to be able to see what is at risk of being taken, re-allocated, or destroyed.

I produced a drone story a year ago on the land that Morehouse College owns near its campus. As developers make offers to purchase land that sits campus-adjacent, Morehouse can play a part in protecting the community that is threatened by the purge that can be a result of gentrification. The College has already begun ways of talking about, and leveraging the use of the property it owns to embolden and make the community in which Morehouse sits one that is seen, valued, and preserved without erasure of a people and our history. We have a unique ability to safeguard and embrace Black people and Black communities that historically have been displaced, and I used the drone to put a visual to this conversation.

I would like to do some projects with 3-D drone footage for data visualization mapping projects to create an immersive experience that allows the viewer to not only see space, but to enter it.

Here is the " Morehouse Land Perspective" drone story:

<https://vimeo.com/430556341>

This visual story of land shows the proximity to campus and some of the land that Morehouse College owns that can be put into partnerships like no other. With a respect for history and

people, properties could become centers of innovation, creative incubators, language-centered student housing, faculty and guest housing, living and learning centers. As developers make offers to purchase land that sits campus-adjacent, Morehouse has a unique ability to safeguard and embrace Black people and Black communities.

AUNT CHLOE: Is documentary film a natural extension of photojournalism for you?

HARRIS: Documentary film is a natural extension of documentary photojournalism. The approach to documentary work is similar, and is very personal. It has to do with connecting to people, establishing trust, observing and shaping stories with the information that is provided. When I entered editorial photojournalism, there were many types of stories that I worked on. Sports, spot news, crime, entertainment, features, profiles, but it was the documentary stories that spoke to my heart, and remain with me today. A few weeks ago, I received a high school graduation photo of CJ, valedictorian of his class, and on his way to Northwestern this fall for undergrad. My heart smiled as the face in that photo took me back to when CJ was three years old, and I spent a week in Kilmichael, Mississippi, doing a documentary photojournalism story for *USA Today* on his mother, Dr. Katrina Po, the only doctor in their country town. I haven't talked to Dr. Po or her family in sixteen years, but they are always on my mind and in my heart. I appreciate documentary stories because they allow me time with people, and I use that time to connect in ways that don't limit me to just telling a story, but allow me to expand who I am as a person while sharing who people are with the audience. When I decided to work on a documentary film, I reached out to a photojournalist I did a fellowship with at the Poynter Institute, Adithya Sambamurthy. We both worked as photojournalists, but Adithya left stills to become a filmmaker, and is years ahead of me with experience as a filmmaker. He agreed to co-produce a short with me, which has allowed me to share ideas, plan steps, and shape the film as a team. What I find most natural is the relationship building and story shaping. The difference is the technical aspect of building sequences to capture the visual angles, and ensuring mic placement is accurate, which are not factors in capturing a series of moments with still images.

AUNT CHLOE: Why did you decide to do a documentary about Barbuda? What do you hope to show or teach people about Barbuda through your documentation of life on the island?

HARRIS: The simple answer is that I am taking ordered steps by God. When it comes to Barbuda and the work that I have done on the island, whether it be still photos, oral history audio recordings, written pieces, or this documentary, I am doing what I have been led to do. In 2005, on a month-long visit to the island, I was approached by Sir Hilborne Frank, my grandmother's godson, and he took me around to meet family. He sat me down at one point and told me to hit record on my recorder. I asked questions about my family and our family connections, but he insisted on telling me about the land, the history of the communally-owned land, and the fight to hold onto it. I remember saying to myself, "When is he going to tell me stories about

Grandma Bertha?” But it was the information he shared with me on that day in 2005 that I came back to as I began to work on the documentary. On September 6, 2017, Hurricane Irma made landfall on Barbuda. Philanthro-Capitalists and Disaster-Capitalists have used the destruction of the island to benefit from the distraction of the storm, to take over the land that Sir Hilbourne spoke of as ancestral lands that could not be bought nor sold. I have been traveling to the island regularly since the storm, and am immersed in the culture that is at risk of being destroyed. The film is to highlight the strength of the people, the culture, and the connection to the land that shapes our identity.

AUNT CHLOE: How have you approached documenting the aftermath of natural disasters? Is there a process you use that is unique to capturing people and places existing under such circumstances?

HARRIS: Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf region at the time when I was early in my career and having hour-long conversations with editors and photojournalists to learn the job. Julia Schmalz was my editor at *USA Today* who talked to me about covering natural disasters. She shared with me that you have two types of photojournalists, and each plays a different role in storm coverage. One goes to the area before the storm hits, tells the story of preparing for the storm and then covers the storm as it hits. They are the war photographers, the action photographers, the people who cover spot news and features. The other photojournalist is going in to tell the story of the people after the storm. They cover the aftermath, connect with people to tell the stories that are longer-form, doing a deep dive into storytelling. I’ve played both roles, covering the actual storm and the aftermath. I approach each situation where I have a respect for the space, the people, and ensure I protect myself from the physical harm and emotional toll that natural disasters have. The challenge for me is when I go back to the comfort of my home. There is a survivor’s guilt that I experience, and limited patience I have with people who have not experienced a natural disaster. I use my gifts and strengths as a storyteller to deal with the guilt, and channel that into stories that can make an impact at some point now or in the future. I also stay connected to the people whose stories I have been fortunate to tell. It’s not just about the image or the camera. It is about the connection to people that is established with the experience of telling their stories.

AUNT CHLOE: What are the current existential threats to the fourth estate? How do you combat them?

HARRIS: The foundation of the fourth estate is integrity, based in truth. When misinformation is published, it normalizes and weakens the principles that journalism stands on. To combat the threats, we need to embrace the truth, the journalists who work with integrity, and the platforms that push content that serve the betterment of our society.

Additional works & information:

Portfolio - <https://mikkiphoto.photoshelter.com/portfolio>

Instagram - <https://www.instagram.com/mikkimedia>

Drone Website - <http://atlantadronelab.com/>

Check out photographs by Mikki Harris in this issue [here](#).

(This interview was conducted via email with questions composed by Tyler Ryan and Elyce Strong Mann.)

Mikki K. Harris is a multimedia artist whose work over the past twenty years has focused on community-based power as examined through the tools of journalism and cultural studies. She uses storytelling to shift perspective in dynamic ways that both preserve and carry culture. She uses oral history, video and photojournalism, as well as writing, to document and shape impactful stories. Her current work focuses on the fight against ecocide and cultural erasure on the island of Barbuda.

A photojournalist by training—with undergraduate and graduate degrees in Economics and Journalism from Spelman College and Boston University, respectively—Mikki has served as a Visual Journalism Fellow at the Poynter Institute and has worked as a photojournalist for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *USA Today* and the *Newark Star-Ledger*. She has photographed six of the past eight U.S. presidents; two of her images illustrating life in Harlem were exhibited at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2005; and her images of the National Urban League are a part of Google's Arts and Culture digital exhibit. Also, two student-produced magazines which she taught visuals for and edited won the Robert F. Kennedy Award.

Mikki became a certified drone pilot in 2019, and co-founded the [Atlanta Drone Lab](#) while in her current role as senior assistant professor of Journalism at Morehouse College.