

Jew Pics

Exploring Jewish photographers and values

by Phil Decker

As Jews we grow up with the awareness of our collective accomplishments. You remember, the lists of musicians, artists, comedians, actors, politicians and Nobel Prize winners. We learn about the disproportionately high representation of Jews in many fields that showcase topnotch talent.

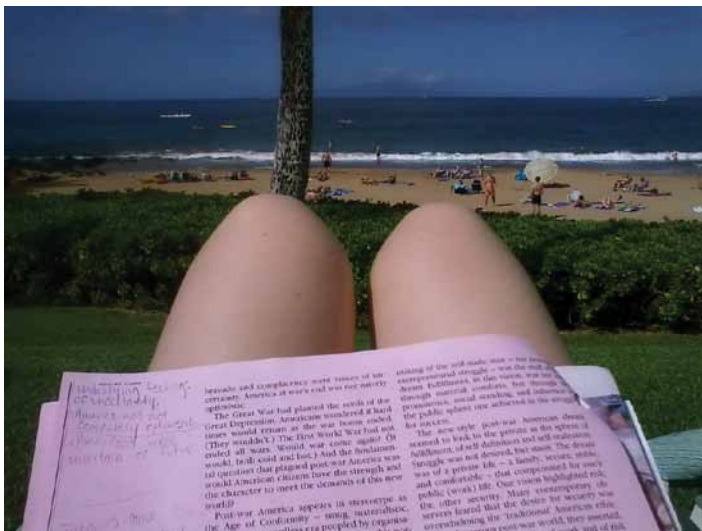
Last summer, preparing to teach photography to the high school youth group “Jew Crew” at Temple Beth Sholom in Salem, I struck another gold mine of Jewish contributions: the field of social documentary photography.

In the mid-1980s I studied at the International Center of Photography in New York City, where we dug into the work of Diane Arbus, Bruce Davidson, Weegee, Milton Rogovin, Robert Frank and Roman Vishniac. But I never quite made the “Jewish” connection.

Now I get it. Combine what Susan Sontag in her pivotal book *On Photography* describes as “the Jews’ hyper-developed moral sensibility,” with a deep sense of history, plus creative talent and you’ve got fertile ground for growing a crop of Jewish social documentary photographers.

In collaboration with then TBS’s Rabbi James Greene, I designed “Jew Pics,” a photography course to explore Jewish values in a creative way, learn basic photography skills and savor the work of Jewish photographers.

We paired key elements of photography with essential Jewish values: Composition plus Family; Light plus Education;




Natalie Brown’s Education photo for the Jew Pics project at Temple Beth Sholom. “I learned there is art in ordinary places and that some of the best pictures aren’t planned,” Brown said.

and Gesture plus Social Justice. I’d teach the students about the photographic element of composition, then the rabbi led students in discussion and text study about family. Students would learn about a Jewish documentary photographer and then create photos that apply composition to the value of Family. Our featured photographer who combined composition and family was Milton Rogovin, who spent decades documenting residents in an impoverished neighborhood of Buffalo, NY. For light and education, we focused on Margaret Bourke-White, a *Life* magazine photojournalist who captured compelling images of historic moments such as the last days of Gandhi’s life, the liberation of concentration camps and refugees en route to Pakistan. To combine gesture and social justice, we studied Roman Vishniac, who documented Jewish communities in Eastern Europe just prior to their eradication during the Holocaust.

As students worked through various assignments, they posted their work on a private Jew Crew Facebook page to share them with other members of the youth group and to enable me to comment on the emerging photos. Students shot images with whatever camera they had available: point-and-shoots, cell phone cameras, fancier digital cameras. The emphasis was on what students see, and what they decide to frame. They learned there’s much to think about and respond to before pressing the button on the camera.

To share the Jew Crew’s work, we decided to create a virtual exhibit, in blog format. Jew Crewers can spread the work on their own Facebook pages and link it to the Beth Sholom website.

The Jew Pics Blog launched May 6, with a new posting each Sunday throughout May and June. Enjoy the Jew Pics Blog at <http://jewpics.blogspot.com>. 

Phil Decker’s photo essays have been exhibited at the Oregon Jewish Museum. He is an elementary school principal in Salem. www.phildeckerphotos.com phildecker6@gmail.com.

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