

Photojournalist Turns Skill into Tool for Activism

By: Khadijah Williams

A bright light shines through a window as Marekka Nickens, a participant, takes a pose that best represents who she is behind a grey backdrop. This is not just a photo shoot, it reflects people who want to voice their opinions.

Nickens participated in the ongoing WE project created by Valérie Berta, a photographer who wants to use photography skills to promote her activism toward equality.

She describes herself as an activist working toward inclusion and uses her photoshoots to bring awareness. She received a master's degree in photojournalism from the University of Missouri in 1994 and a master's degree in English from the Université Paris VII in 1984. Berta started the [WE project](#) in 2017 with portraits of people from marginalized groups and a workshop called Voices based in Missouri.

Berta wanted to explore new things and cultures that lead to expanding her education. Born and raised in the Southern region of France near the French Riviera, Berta was in a community built on strong familial bonds. Her hometown offered beauty and artistic people that surrounded her. After traveling the world on news assignments, she met her husband, an acrobat in the Kelly Miller Circus. Later, Berta joined the circus and had two boys. Berta has documents of her experience as a photographer and writer for the circus called The Mudshow Diaries. Her children of Native American and Peruvian lineages played a part in her awareness. The experience of raising biracial children opened Berta to what people from marginalized groups must face daily in society.

“It had deepened my commitment to fight racial and ethnic discrimination,” Berta said. The WE project merged her activism with photography using her studio to capture natural light portraits.

[Evonna Woods](#), writing about an activist interview for Reproaction reports after the Presidential election of 2016, Berta described waking up to the news of Trump winning as “a kick in the butt.” The election was a wake-up call that pushed her to take part in more activism as she felt there was a need to fight hatred. The project shows marginalized communities that are comprising people of color, immigrants, members of the LGBT community and people with disabilities.

“Berta asked if I could write a statement about our experience in Columbia, take my photograph and do a video reciting the written piece to upload on her website,” said Nickens, Vice Principal of West Boulevard Elementary.

Berta wants to bring the communities together for intersectional dialogue to discover ways to fight against discrimination. Berta hopes to showcase the WE project in a public area for people that are not from a marginalized group to promote inclusion in society.

Berta also has an ongoing social project called the [Voices](#) Workshop that introduces up to ten children from marginalized communities and at-risk youths to photojournalism. It is an eight-week activity which has two-hour long meetings as a moderator with six volunteers which provide presentations and hands-on learning experiences. She receives cameras for the children from sponsorships by companies in the photo industry. Berta created this workshop to build self-confidence and inspire the children to pursue photojournalism. By using photojournalism, the children can develop their own voices.

“She always has good advice on what I can do to be a better journalist and photographer, for example, I’ll tell her the sort of story or project I’m working on and she’ll give me perspectives that I can look at it through,” said Monique Woo, a Voices Workshop mentor and MU student.

When she first started the Voices workshop, Woods reports that Berta traveled to [Hayti, Missouri](#). In a small town where the locals wave at passing vehicles and call each other by name, Berta found a fine racial line dividing minorities from the general community.

She wants to give children the opportunity to use their learned skills to show their view of the world. Participants in the workshop learn about the types of cameras, photo documentations, and how media works. The students receive assignments to take photographs around their environment, a critique over their work which is guided, and witness a presentation over global photojournalists’ works.

The local newspaper published the photographs that the children took which was an accomplishment for Berta as the community did not represent the marginalized groups.

“Even if you could only change one life then you have done your work,” Berta said.

She has worked at the Columbia Missourian, The News-Journal, The Herald-Journal, and the Jacksonville Journal-Courier. Berta states photography is her calling as she uses her eyes to capture a moment which holds the essence of an event or person. She sees photography as a method to empathize with a story or person who places someone at the scene.

For the WE project, participants are given a platform to speak about their thoughts and feelings while living in Missouri.

“The biggest outcome would be exposure for people to know where to go to find different testimonies of minority groups to really just think about their stories and how they deal with certain situations to understand there are still issues in our community,” Nickens said.

More information about can be found at: <http://www.valerieberta.com>