



LEFT: The Talk. RIGHT: Backside of Africa.

PHOTOS BY MARCELLA DAVID

Academic captures images and insights

FAMU provost and law professor Marcella David's photography melds many interests

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Life exists as a continuum of many personalities and interests for Marcella David, Provost and Vice-President for Academic Affairs and Professor of Law at Florida A&M University. When she travels she is simultaneously lawyer, tourist, photographer, knitter and overall interested person. At times, one purpose will override another, so vacations may be linked to photographic opportunities while other trips give her insights into people of different cultures, informing her legal perceptions of law and international human rights.

David is a devoted academic and held many university positions prior to Tallahassee, with degrees from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, The University of Michigan Law School, and was a Ford Foundation Fellow in Public International Law at Harvard Law School. Working as an international lawyer has taken her abroad to places like Africa, Mexico, and Thailand. In one post-Gulf War investigation, she looked into the impact of economic sanctions and began asking to take people's photographs during interviews to place a face with their stories.

"You're trying to capture the relationship between the environment and people," explains David. "I remember being in Iraq and talking to people whose house had been destroyed or who had lost somebody. Taking a picture of them in situ helped to demonstrate what happened to them."

Her childhood home in Queens, New York, lies in the shadow of the former Shea Stadium, home of the Mets baseball franchise — David, now 52, brightly implies how this fact might have taught her to believe in hard luck stories with the ever-present possibility of redemption. Her enrollment at William Cooper High School gave her access to a specialized law program, and she was grateful to participate in the NYC mock trial competition that piqued her interest in the profession.

International law was of special interest as images from the Arab-Israeli conflict and South Africa's apartheid flooded television news stations. David first studied engineering and was awarded scholarships in science before

going on to law school. It was the act of leaving home that drew her into photography.

"As a little girl in church, travel was a very big deal," explains David. "If somebody went someplace they'd come back with slides and we'd all have a slideshow to see pictures from Africa or Europe. As a sophomore in college studying abroad, I also thought of traveling as being connected with going back and sharing with my family what I saw when I was away."

She was placed in the role of photographer early on by her mother at family occasions, working first with an Instamatic until she received her first Nikon. She took the camera on her first pivotal trips to Iraq in 1991, South Africa in 1992, and India in 2000, and documented significant moments for her cases, cementing photography as central to her own life.

As individuals react differently to a camera based on his or her culture, David finds establishing a rapport with her interviewees and subjects to be extremely important to avoid exploitation or unease. While children will instinctively smile and jump in front of the lens, she found in Africa that many adults become very serious and pose for the camera, something David describes as elegant in its own way, even with her continued prompting.

"I went on a trip to Tanzania and wanted to take a picture of this lovely woman who was running the camp," recalls David. "She was so engaging and charming, but when I went to take a picture she instantly made a serious face. I was singing Michael Jackson to get her to laugh and I just barely got a smile."

While investigating Cambodia's garment industry, she captured a woman in a single click. She was sitting on the market floor and David says she could see history in the woman's face. Though unseen scars on the woman's feet are left out after shifting the photo to black and white and cropping out flaws in the framing, David sensed the woman's tireless energy that was evocative of a specific time, place, and wisdom.

A self-professed omnivore when it comes to photography, David has captured an array of events and environments over the years. Children are her most eager subjects across cultures, and among her favorite photographs is "Uganda Kids," which she took inside a small hut in Kampala. The candid shot captures the wide-eyed and smiling faces of children peering in at the visitors, with one boy sticking out his tongue in the background.

"Sometimes you see what other people see and there's no shame in that because you do what you do to that picture to make it your own," explains David, who framed the shot after seeing her friend snap a few photos of the same scene.

Sophisticated camera lenses have become David's other set of eyes, even serving that purpose on a recreational trip to the Galapagos Islands. Trading glasses for goggles, but blurry-eyed without the former, she recorded underwater video and still-frames of her snorkeling adventure to watch later



Tortured Art.

MARCELLA DAVID

and see what she couldn't before. She's been most challenged by her trips to Antarctica and the Arctic Circle, capturing whales, penguins, and polar bears. Both trips required her sure-footedness in icy conditions while operating her camera equipment with numbed hands.

In fact, "critters" are a large part of David's repertoire. She makes it a point to travel to locations in order to capture specific animals, like driving through game preserves in South Africa and Tanzania to find exotic and unique species. She enjoys learning more about the animals' habits and behaviors from specialists leading her excursions, and uses the information in taking her photographs. Birds and cheetahs intrigue her, finding them to be challenging moving targets.

"If you're on a trip of a certain quality you can get relatively close and that's really fascinating," says David. "You never want to disturb the animals, but you get to learn about them and see their habits. Then you get to see what other people see in them."

She appreciates the work of Brent Paul, who specializes in animal photography of the American west, partly because she has done workshops with him and witnessed the behind-the-scenes set-up of his photographs. By understanding how he got the picture, David admires his work among that of Moose Peterson, Laurie Excell, and Joe McNally — three photographers who led her Digital Landscape workshop in Yellowstone National Park in 2012.

Two important lessons occurred during the trip outside of the technical camera work. The first happened while the group of students waited out a winter storm in a yurt where Joe McNally led an impromptu workshop. He reflected light off a man's white T-shirt to highlight David's face, teaching her resourcefulness. Venturing back outside after the rain cleared taught her the second most important lesson.

"I learned from them that bad weather is your friend," says David. "When the weather clears, you have clouds in the sky that do interesting things with the light, the tree trunks are darker with water and provide more contrast, and there's a glistening aura. You just have to wait out the storm or sometimes even seek the storm."

Diversity in all shapes and forms inspires her, and next on her travel list is the Great Wall of China, Patagonia's beautiful mountaintops, and someday



Haiti or Turkey. In the meantime, David is excited to share her past adventures for the first time in a solo exhibit "Nature's Personality" at FAMU's Meek Eaton Archives and Museum now through Sept. 1 as part of the university's "Artists in Bloom" series.

A taste of these travels includes an isolated perspective of a sculpture called "Tortured Art" from The Hague in the Netherlands; a place very much associated with its confluence of art and national human rights. The "Backside of Africa" is David's humorous experience of having animals continually turn around on her in South Africa. Also on view is a scene of Lake Placid titled "Charming" that was named after Moose Peterson's tickling critique of landscape photo.

"If I go to a place with people I want to tell a story," says David. "With animals you want to tell a story and see how this snapshot fits into something greater. If you want your image to touch people they've got to be able to look at the image and get something from it and hopefully it's capturing a feeling or perspective that you can use to communicate."

David herself still feels somewhat in bloom. She has a newfound confidence in the value of her yearly calendar she sells and gives as holiday gifts, and her photographs still allow her to transport friends and family on her journeys.

New to the Tallahassee area, but already having been on the Wakulla Springs boat tour several times for photography sessions, she looks forward to experiencing all the area has to offer. Going between her many roles as educator and academic, David is always in search of something new to learn.

"We live in an amazing place full of birds, fish, turtles, cats, trees, flowers, and environments to experience," recounts David. "The people will have different kinds of food, music and smells, and you wonder what their experience is like and if they are hungry, cold, or satisfied. You learn that wherever you go, people find a way of having enjoyment, of laughing, playing, working, talking, and creating, and of being satisfied even if they're not necessarily full."



ADAM M. TAYLOR

IF YOU GO

What: Nature's Personality. Photography by Marcella David
When: 9 a.m.-5 p.m.,

Marcella David, FAMU Provost and Vice-President for Academic Affairs has a show of her photographs at the Meek-Eaton Southeastern Regional Black Archives and Museum.