

RESEARCH IN CONTEXT

Module ADAD5003/C

Course, documentary media photography

And visual activism

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TITLE, Community engagement photographer

Introduction

This essay explores my personal experiences in community engagement through photography, emphasizing its benefits and challenges, and providing insights into the way visual storytelling fosters community cohesion. Community engagement involves individuals and groups coming together to address public concerns and improve community well-being. Photography plays a significant role in this process by documenting events, telling visual stories, and raising awareness about critical issues. As a photographer, my community engagement has allowed me to capture communal efforts and highlight the stories of those often overlooked.

Historical Background of Photography in Community Engagement

Photography is a powerful tool for social change, documenting and communicating important issues. From the early days of photojournalism, images have raised awareness, evoked empathy, and driven social movements. Iconic photographs, such as Dorothea Lange's images of the Great Depression (arts and culture) ref, 1929 and the civil rights movement (fine art globe) (mid-20th century) have been pivotal in shaping public perception and policy. Understanding this historical context highlights the enduring impact of photography on community engagement and its potential to inspire action and change.

Community Engagement through Photography

My community engagement through photography began in night classes when I discovered my passion for capturing moments and telling stories through images. As a migrant, coming from a different cultural background, I was aware of how different everything was. My initial interest was fueled by a desire to document the world around me and share those images with others. I participated in local community events, where I began to see the power of photography in highlighting the stories of individuals working for positive change.

A key milestone in my journey was volunteering as a photographer for local charities which opened my eyes to the potential of photography as a tool for advocacy and community building. Documenting the organizations' initiatives allowed me to connect with others and understand their perspectives and challenges. This engagement deepened my commitment to photography and reinforced my belief in its role as a catalyst for social change.

Documenting Community Events

Throughout my journey, I have been involved in various types of community engagement as a photographer, each offering unique experiences and opportunities for impact.

One of my primary roles has been documenting a wide range of community events, including cultural festivals (e.g. Race Council Cymru's Black History Month event in the Millenium Centre), fundraisers (e.g. Eid in the Park for Swansea Council), and public meetings (e.g. City of Sanctuary AGM event as a Sanctuary Ambassador), community events (Community cohesion meetings for South Wales Police as both Chair of the Community Cohesion group and as leader for PCSO Youth group) . These events provided platforms for capturing the vibrancy and diversity of the different groups in Swansea, both for them and for the wider community.

I have also had the opportunity to collaborate with a wide range of local organizations on community projects. The Swansea City's 50th anniversary celebrations took place along St Helen's Road from Joe's Ice Cream to the YMCA, with music, singers, food, school dance groups, bouncy castles, face-painting and many other things. On the day I was involved as a participant, singing with Y Theatre and doing henna painting. Leading up the event I involved in a wide range of photography and film projects, and these were all on display along the road. One example was a collaboration with Swansea YMCA working with the young carers group. Youthcare. This group is made of young disabled, autistic, LGBTQ+

people, or young people with disabled parents. By conducting photography workshops and mentoring young photographers, I tried to give the young carers the skills to become visual storytellers.

Another project for the Anniversary was a project with EYST (Ethnic Minorities and Youth Support Team) documenting migrant identities. I took photographs of people from different cultures who are living in Swansea, they were displayed on big panels with little stories about everyone involved in the project. I also made a film of the people all speaking their languages of origin with English subtitles. These were all displayed on St Helen's Road.

Benefits of Using Photography in Community Engagement

Engaging with my community through photography has provided numerous benefits, both for myself and the communities I have worked with.

Photography has the ability to build awareness and foster connections within the community to create a more inclusive and supportive community environment. By documenting and sharing the stories of community members, I try to highlight their contributions and foster empathy and understanding.

I have gained valuable skills in visual storytelling, communication, and project management through these community projects. These experiences have complemented my formal education and prepared me for future professional challenges. Additionally, by teaching photography to others, I have contributed to their learning and skill development, creating a ripple effect of knowledge and creativity.

Engaging with my community through photography has been a catalyst for personal growth. It has increased my empathy, understanding, and commitment to social justice. The challenges and successes I have encountered have shaped my character and reinforced my belief in the importance of community involvement. These experiences have also provided a sense of purpose and fulfillment, knowing that my work contributes to the well-being of others.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

Community engagement through photography comes with its own set of challenges. One of these is managing the technical and logistical aspects of photography in various settings. Ensuring that I have the right equipment, gaining access to events, and working within time constraints require careful planning and adaptability. This experience has taught me the importance of preparation and flexibility in my work.

Photography in community engagement also involves significant ethical considerations. Respecting the privacy and dignity of individuals, obtaining informed consent, and avoiding the exploitation of vulnerable subjects are crucial ethical responsibilities. Navigating these issues has taught me the importance of ethical practice and informed consent in my work.

Building trust with community members has been essential for successful engagement. Initially, some individuals may be hesitant to be photographed or share their stories. By approaching my work with empathy, respect, and transparency, I seek to establish meaningful connections with community members. This trust has been fundamental to capturing authentic and impactful images.

Case Studies of Successful Community Engagement Projects

Being an activist involved in a range of community projects gave me the basis for my photography and film practice. The case studies below are some examples of my wider involvement.

1. Unity in Diversity (UID): local drop in Centre

Unity in Diversity (UID) is a support group that provides food, support and learning opportunities to asylum seekers and refugees in the Swansea area (UiDSwansea.com, 2024). I participated in uid's local drop in since I came to Swansea in 2016. We coordinated with local businesses, schools, and volunteers to collect and distribute food to families in need. This project provided essential resources to these people, raising awareness about food insecurity, and the need for English classes for migrant people. My role in organizing and managing the logistics of the drive taught me the importance of teamwork and planning. This empowered me to become Trustee of the charity and Women's Organizer, organizing and running a fortnightly women's activity group. We recently applied for funding for a photography workshop, and a podcasting and storytelling project. I will be leading both of these.

2. Displaced People in Action (Dpia): Advocacy Forum group

Dpia (Dpia, 2024) has been running support activities in Wales since 2001. The advocacy forum group campaigns on issues relating to asylum seekers and refugees, using research, community engagement, and collaboration with local officials to try to influence policy changes for the better. We worked with Migrant Help on problems such as housing. We were successful in campaigning for wifi in asylum housing, which is important for everyone, especially if they are doing any course, or for families with children doing schoolwork. I am still part of this monthly group. My experience with the group

demonstrated the impact of informed and organized advocacy on involving the community in policy-making processes.

3. Womens4resources: Community Garden Project

Womens4resources is a small organization working with women and girls in partnership between Wales and Africa (2024) One of their projects is the establishment of a community garden in Swansea Quaker Meeting House. This grassroots initiative involves community members in the planning and maintenance of the garden, creating a shared space that provided fresh vegetables and fruits, as well as educational opportunities. The project not only improved access to healthy food but also fostered a sense of community and environmental stewardship. Once the food was ready, we would cook together and share food. I have also been involved in Women4resources yearly events in Swansea Green Fayre since 2018. I helped them with their stalls, provided food and did henna painting. My participation in these projects reinforced my belief in the value of community-driven solutions.

4.ESRC Social Science Festival project (Economic and Social Research Council): 'Helping Hands'

'Helping Hands' was an ESRC- funded project organized by Dr Nilufar Ahmed (Bristol University) as part of the ESRC Social Science Festival in 2019. It was inspired by how most people in Swansea want to help each other. Fabric hands were created across the community from all ages - from local primary schools to older people's care homes and various community groups including refugee and asylum support groups -and glued onto hangings. Bringing community, health, and social organisations together, it culminated in a one-day event, in the Grand Multicultural Hub which attracted over 300 people in November.

I photographed the 'Helping hands' hangings and the public event. I tried to showcase the diversity and unity of the community by capturing the interactions and performances of different cultural groups. The images were used in promotional materials and social media, helping to increase awareness and attendance at the festival. The hangings have gone on to be featured in other cross-cultural events, such as the Swansea Womens's Asylum and Refugee Group's collaboration with Swansea Central Library and Swansea Community Flavours exhibition at the Waterfront Museum (a collaboration between the Waterfront, Swansea Womens's Asylum and Refugee Group and the Swansea Bay Health Board funded Chai&chat).

5.Race Council Cymru (RCC) Youth Photography exhibition

The youth exhibition was a particularly rewarding experience. Through hands-on sessions and workshops, I was able to be involved in various activities and empower young people, dancers, and singers. The workshops culminated in a community exhibition where the participants showcased their work, gaining recognition and confidence in their abilities. I was able to document the event by taking photographs as well as participants to make their exhibition successful by showing my culture and understanding the value of the potential of photography to engage and uplift young people, fostering a sense of accomplishment and belonging. The workshops culminated in a community exhibition where the participants showcased their work, gaining recognition and confidence in their abilities.

I have many more selection case studies for my involvement with community enegement being a photographer and my recognition such as Swansea University Research Institute for Arts and Humanities (multi-cultural Swansea snaps competition in 2017) i was the winner of the competition.

Fashion show (women's group) 2020

Windrush project..... ACC 2018-2019

Chronic project during lockdown.2020

Etc...

As a community activist photographer, I became interested in other examples of artists who use their work to highlight social, cultural, and political issues within communities.

1. JR

JR is a French street artist and photographer who is known for his large-scale black-and-white photographic portraits. He began his career as a graffiti artist before moving to photography, and his work often involves pasting large portraits in public spaces.

Medium: Photography, Street Art

Notable Works: Inside Out Project, Women Are Heroes

Community Engagement: JR is known for its large-scale public photography projects. He captures the faces of individuals from diverse communities and pastes them in public spaces, turning community members into public art pieces that highlight their stories and issues.

Story of Community Engagement: One of the most famous projects is the Inside Out Project which encourages people around the world to take their portraits and paste them in public spaces. This project aims to give a voice to individuals and communities, turning personal identity into public art.

Zanele Muholi

Zanele Muholi is a South African photographer and visual activist whose work focuses on documenting the lives of Black LGBTQ+ communities. Muholi's work challenges stereotypes and seeks to increase the visibility of marginalized groups. Story of Community Engagement: Muholi's series Faces and Phases documents the lives of Black lesbians and transgender individuals in South Africa. By creating a visual archive, Muholi's work provides visibility and recognition to these often overlooked communities.

3. Gordon Parks

Gordon Parks was an American photographer, musician, writer, and film director, renowned for his work documenting African American life and culture in the 20th century. He was the first African American photographer to work for Life magazine.

Story of Community Engagement: Parks and photography often highlighted issues of social justice and poverty. His photo essay and Harlem Gang Leader and for Life magazine provided a nuanced look at the lives of young gang members, humanizing them and shedding light on their circumstances.

4. LaToya Ruby Frazier

LaToya Ruby Frazier is an American artist and photographer who uses her work to address issues of environmental justice, healthcare inequality, and economic racism. Her work is deeply personal, often involving her family and hometown.

Story of Community Engagement: Frazier and series The Notion of Family documents her own family and struggles in the industrial town of Braddock, Pennsylvania. The work captures the effects of economic decline and environmental neglect on the community, blending personal narrative with broader social commentary.

5. Mary Ellen Mark

Mary Ellen Mark was an American photographer known for her photojournalism, portraiture, and advertising photography. Her work often focused on people on the margins of society.

Story of Community Engagement: One of Mark most impactful projects was Street wise, which documented the lives of homeless youth in Seattle. Her intimate and empathetic portraits provided a window into the lives of these young people, highlighting their resilience and humanity.

6.Rania Matar

Rania Matar is a Lebanese-American photographer whose work explores issues of identity and femininity, particularly among women and girls in the United States and the Middle East.

Story of Community Engagement: Matar project A Girl and Her Room and captures teenage girls in their personal spaces, offering a glimpse into their lives and identities. By engaging with her subjects on a personal level, Matar work fosters understanding and connection across cultural divides.

Many more ,Sebastião Salgado and Shirin Neshat whose work demonstrates the power of art to address critical social issues, promote dialogue, and foster community involvement, highlighting the intersection of art and activism.

Conclusion

Photographers can play a vital role in documenting and advocating for positive change. By staying engaged, collaborating with local organizations, and using their skills to highlight

important issues, photographers can contribute to building stronger and more resilient communities.

I aim to continue using photography as a tool for community engagement, focusing on projects that address social and environmental issues. I hope to expand my work to include more collaborative and participatory approaches, involving community members in the storytelling process. Additionally, I plan to pursue further education and training in visual storytelling and community development to enhance my impact.

My experiences in community engagement through photography have provided profound insights into the power of visual storytelling and collective action. Through various projects and initiatives, I have witnessed the benefits of photography in raising awareness, fostering connections, and driving social change. As I look to the future, I am inspired to continue this work and encourage others to join in the effort to create a more connected and just society through the lens of a camera.

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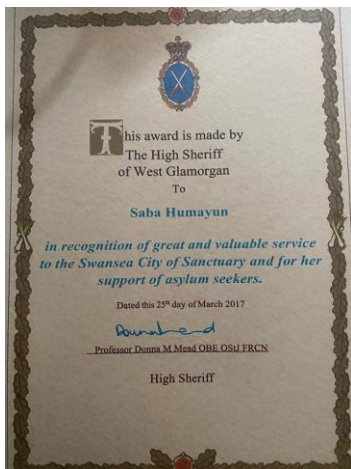
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Appendix 1: My Achievements

awards, certificate.....



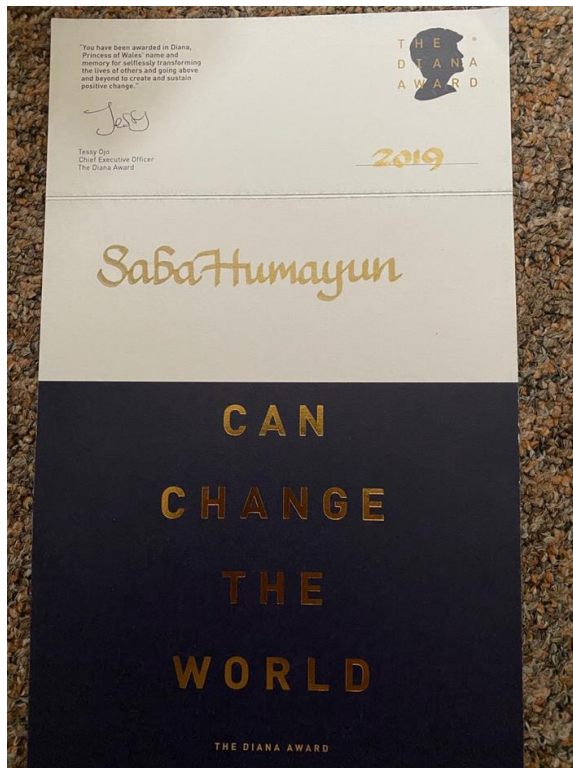
first certificate of involvement with community.



2nd achievement winning Swansea snap competition as a community enegement photographer and activist.



3rd achievement as a community activist



4th achievement of international Diana award.

Picture of involvement with the community, Including eyst, uid, dpia, womens group.ymca youth group.





Appendix 2: Community photographs.



unity in diversity ref (case study) no. 1



windrush project



dpia advocacy forum (case study) no 2.





(RCC) Youth Photography

exhibition (Case study) no 3







helping hand community project (case study) no 4.

