Photography exhibition coming Friday to WKU

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An exhibition tying together more than 50 years of visual storytelling statewide will have its opening reception Friday at Jody Richards Hall Auditorium in an evening that'll feature a roundtable of leaders and contributors from four Kentucky documentary photography initiatives.

The 6:30 p.m. roundtable will explore the evolution of documentary photography alongside journalism, technology and society, according to the event release. The 8 p.m. wine and cheese reception will follow for the opening of the photo exhibition, which will center how storytelling and communities statewide have been transformed over the decades; it'll feature images from the Mountain Workshops — a mentorship initiative focused on the visual documentation of Kentucky — and be curated by Timothy Broekema, professor of visual journalism and photography at Western Kentucky University.

The roundtable and exhibition invite the public to explore the commonwealth through a visual retrospective from the four documentary projects, which span communities, generations and lived experiences, according to the event release. Department instructor Jonathan Adams added that he believes it's important to be able to look at documents from history to see what life was like — and to know it's real, within a community — particularly amid the surge in usage of artificial intelligence and fabricated images.

The roundtable will feature panelists from the Mountain Workshops, Kentucky Documentary Photography Project, Picture Kentucky Workshop and Project 306.36 Boyd's Station. Broekema and Adams came to the idea for it after realizing that Kentucky is likely one of few states with as many as four different ongoing projects that focus on documenting communities with photography statewide.

For the exhibition, Broekema is selecting around 65 photographs out of thousands from the Mountain Workshops, he said. The workshops began as a WKU project before including people nationwide, mostly students and early professionals

honing their skills, Adams said.

On one hand, the gallery will stand out for its display of photographs taken throughout significant technological changes of the times, from the black and white negatives of decades ago to the mirrorless cameras that have surged in popularity over recent years.

But also, Broekema said, the exhibition is about the stories that change and those that don't. He recalled, in his review candidate pictures for the gallery, seeing two images taken decades apart: a man standing at a gravesite, and 40 years later, someone else in a nearly identical position, at the grave of his mother.

"Obviously, our faces, our cars, our streets change — but many times, it's the same story: It's everyone living life the same way," he said. "There is change, but also, there is not. We tend to repeat history."

The event is hosted by Western Kentucky University's School of Media and Communication and the John B. Gaines Family Lecture Series. The latter, an annual event that brings renowned journalists to speak at WKU, was launched in 2004 to honor the 150th anniversary of the Daily News, which was previously owned by the Gaines family.