



OPENING DOORS

BY CAROL CUMMINGS

SOMEONE ONCE SAID THAT YOU DON'T TAKE A PHOTOGRAPH. YOU ASK, QUIETLY, TO BORROW IT. WHEN YOU VIEW THE COLLECTION OF PHOTOGRAPHS JEANIE ADAMS-SMITH HAS TAKEN THROUGHOUT HER CAREER, YOU GET A TRUE SENSE OF WHAT THAT REALLY MEANS. HER PICTURES ARE, QUITE SIMPLY, INDIVIDUAL WORKS OF ART, WHICH GIVE THE VIEWER A TRUE GLIMPSE INTO THE LIVES OF THE SUBJECTS.

Each photo project has been born, in some way, out of Adams-Smith's life experiences. The images provide an intimate look into not only the lives of the subjects, but at the life of the artist as well.

Adams-Smith is an associate professor of photo-journalism at Western Kentucky University, a position she took in 2002 after serving ten years as a photo editor at the *Chicago Tribune*. She has received state, regional, and national acclaim for a number of important photo projects.

Her most recent project, *Doorways of Old Havana*, stemmed from two recent trips to Old Havana, Cuba. Her involvement in the Old Havana project happened strictly by chance. Andrew McMichael, a history professor at WKU, sent a campus-wide email asking about sources for sports-oriented magazines and newspapers. Adams-Smith responded to him, and in their subsequent emails he asked if she wanted to go to Cuba. Along with her husband, David Adams-Smith, she joined Dr. McMichael on the trip during the summer of 2006, and the photo project was born.

Doorways of Old Havana takes a visual look at the cultural significance of doorways in Old Havana, the area of Cuba's national capital that lies within the original Havana city walls. Adams-Smith's photographic essay examines the city's cultural phenomenon of people doing business, socializing, and even praying in doorways.



15-year-old, SaraVe`dd Marquez, prepares for her Quinceañero near the Plaza de San Fransisco in Old Havana. Marquez will spend all day on a photography shoot with her family. Her father has been saving for this day since his daughter was born. The Quinceañero is considered one of the biggest days in a young Cuban woman's life.

Adams-Smith's first ten-day trip to Cuba was the result of a summer faculty grant. She returned to Cuba in January 2006, after she received another WKU faculty grant to complete the project. "We simply walked the streets and observed," she explained. "The people were amazing, and we had no trouble getting photos. In fact, the images seemed to jump out at us. Everywhere we went, we found interesting stories to tell, and people freely invited us into their homes and businesses. It was an amazing way to be introduced to Cuba and Cuban culture."

As they walked, they saw musical events, girls learning the flamenco, and even a Pentecostal religious service. They also visited five schools and a boxing club that was managed by a former five-time Cuban national champion. A total of several hundred images will eventually be used to create a book about the experience. So far, the results of this project have been displayed at photo exhibits at WKU's Mass Media and Technology Hall, the Capitol Arts Center in Bowling Green, and at Union Pier, Michigan.

In part, this project helped earn Adams-Smith the distinction of being named Kentucky Photographer of the Year in 2006. She is the first academic professional ever to have received this award.

She says it would be difficult for her to choose a photo from Old Havana that is her favorite; however one photo that always generates comments is of a young girl who is celebrating her Quinceañera, an elaborate celebration of her fifteenth birthday. In Cuba, the Quinceañero is often considered one of the most important days of a young woman's life, because it officially marks her transition from child to adult, and it brings with it respect and responsibility. Usually the Quinceañera wears a formal dress, and the day is celebrated as the biggest party of her life. In Adams-Smith's photograph, the girl is bending over, showing a small part of her ankles, and changing her shoes.

"I was able to spend the entire day with the girl," she said. "Her family was not wealthy, but her celebration involved three different outfits and colors. I think this photograph is unique





because it captured a rare moment with a modest young woman and demonstrated her innocence and beauty.”

Adams-Smith also visited a maternity home for unwed mothers while she was in Old Havana. “This was thrilling to me and represented my passion — outlining social issues, particularly those related to women and children.”

That passion has driven her involvement with most of her major photography projects. “Each project has brought something to me and my photography,” she explained. “Each has been an enriching experience.”

Her devotion to women’s issues, along with a personal experience while in college, led her to create the 2006 *Witness* project, a photo exhibit that was displayed at WKU’s Mass Media and Technology Hall Gallery and at the University of Louisville during Sexual Assault Awareness Month. Funded by a grant from the Kentucky Foundation for Women, the exhibit is a series of portraits of rape victims. “The *Witness* project was born out of a personal experience in college with an attempted date rape,” she explained. “I interviewed a dozen women who had been raped or sexually assaulted and shared their stories through a portrait series. The purpose of the project was to bring awareness to college-age women that this happens and there’s help.”

Adams-Smith’s longest-running project was her *Survivors: Children of Divorce* collaboration with her husband. “When I married David, I became a stepmom (to Alexandra, who was nine years old), and I wanted to find information about being a good stepparent,” she said. “I found articles and support groups, but no piece that was a comprehensive, visual look at how divorce impacts children in our society across the country.”

The seven-year project was funded, in part, by a faculty grant from WKU. The *Children of Divorce* project followed thirty children whose parents were divorced. “It was powerful and a great learning experience,” she said. “It also hit an audience who was looking for guidance, and it demonstrated visually what kids go through when their parents are in chaos. Since I worked on this project the longest, it has a large sense of accomplishment attached to it. It is also the project that I get asked about the most.”

Survivors: Children of Divorce is a documentary photography book that was published in 2004. It features a wealth of black and white images by Jeanie Adams-Smith, along with stories written by David Adams-Smith. Images from the book have been displayed at Judge Margaret Huddleston’s Warren County Family Courtroom, to bring awareness to parents and families. A multimedia piece from this project earned first place in Pictures of the Year International, and the book was nominated by WKU for a Pulitzer Prize in non-fiction literature.



Adams-Smith, a Bowling Green native, is a two-time WKU alumna, having earned both a bachelor’s degree in photojournalism and a master’s degree in communication. She received a second master’s in visual communications from Ohio University, where she taught in the Visual Communications Department and served as a John S. and James L. Knight Fellow. While at the *Chicago Tribune*, most of her time was spent as the National/Foreign Picture Editor, where her duties included researching and assigning photographs for the national and foreign bureaus and working on many of the *Tribune’s* special projects, including *Killing Our Children*, a year-long documentary on the children murdered in Chicago in 1993, that won the Robert F. Kennedy Award for Journalism.

Photography was not Adams-Smith’s original thought for a career pursuit. She enrolled at WKU as a Biology major and later explored Journalism. “It was then that I took a photojournalism class with Dave LaBelle, and from that point I was hooked,” she said. “He was very influential in my career as a photojournalist and later as a teacher. He has remained a mentor to me.”

While she was working on her first master’s degree at WKU, Dr. Randy Capps was her adviser and observed her as she taught a Fundamentals of Public Speaking course. He suggested that she consider a career in education, a comment she promptly dismissed. However, a number of years later she took a leave of absence from the *Tribune* to complete her second master’s. “I then got a real taste of teaching, and I fell in love with it,” she said. “It combines my love of editing, teaching, and creativity.”

These experiences prepared Adams-Smith for the day when former Journalism Department Head Jo-Ann Albers contacted her and suggested she apply for the open photojournalism position at WKU. She took the job in January 2002 and hasn’t looked back.

“The photojournalism community has always been a sharing community,” she explained. “I learned from countless top professionals who were willing to share what they had learned. It was natural for me to want to do that myself — to give back to students.”

Wherever she goes, Adams-Smith seems to open a window to the souls of her subjects through her photographs. “I think a lot of factors go into access, such as knowing the subject matter, so you speak to people from a knowledgeable background,” she said. “In addition, empathy is very important. A lot of my projects are because I have been through a similar experience, and I think I am a good listener. I listen to their stories and then people just feel more comfortable around me and more comfortable being themselves. Then really great pictures can happen.” ■