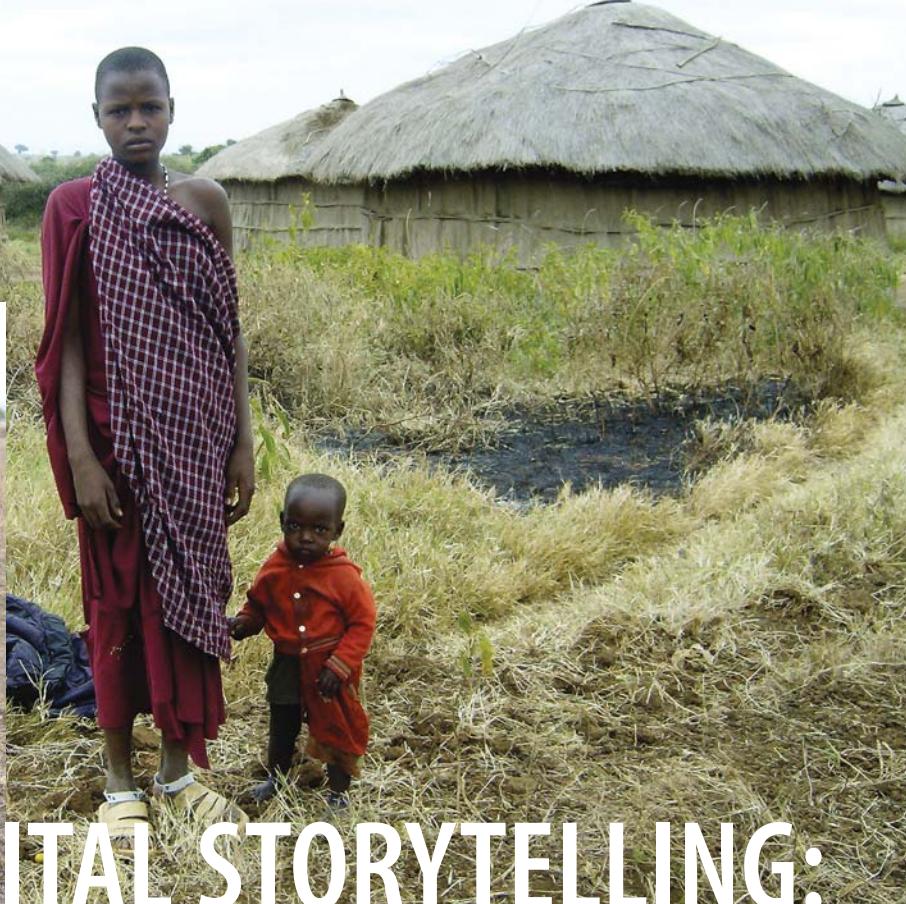


JEFF YOUNG



DIGITAL STORYTELLING: Preserving a Cultural Tradition



VILLAGE GALLERIES BEGAN IN 2005 as a group of secondary school teachers/amateur photographers who believed in the power of photography to transform culture. As a group, we had all been heavily influenced by the 2004 film 'Born Into Brothels', which was the result of 35mm photography workshops with the children of prostitutes in the brothels of Calcutta. We were dazzled by the beauty of the photography and, as teachers, were encouraged by the successful teaching techniques in the film.

We began to throw around the idea of using digital technology to the same end. Digital cameras and printers would allow us to get the photos into the hands of the photographers very quickly. As teachers, the idea of storytelling from photography seemed a natural.

As luck would have it, a member of our group (James Croker), had a sister (Chanel Croker) working in international aid, in Tanzania with Amani Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD); coincidentally, Chanel was to be in Toronto in the next couple of weeks. When we met, she told us that in 2002 the Maasai elders had put out a call for 'technologists' to help them preserve their culture by combining 'formal' and 'informal' education. The elders had expressed a deep need for cultural preservation. With Chanel, we decided that photography could effectively be a cultural preservation enabler.

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EN BREF En juillet 2007, une équipe de huit Canadiens est arrivée dans le village de Monduli, en Tanzanie, avec l'objectif d'enseigner la narration numérique dans les villages masaïs. Pour les anciens, l'éducation consiste à transmettre des expériences – une coutume bien ancrée dans la culture masaï. Les sages semblent comprendre que la technologie moderne est bel et bien implantée, mais ils ont choisi de ne pas la laisser envahir leur culture. Notamment, les sages – particulièrement les enseignants – ont considéré que le projet de photographie numérique était une façon d'équilibrer l'emploi de la technologie avec leur pratique ancestrale de narration. Lorsqu'on leur a donné une technologie qui leur permet d'enregistrer – plutôt que de se faire enregistrer – les Masaïs se sont complètement plongés dans l'activité de raconter. Nous voulions que la photo prenne une place naturelle dans leur culture orale – et cela a fonctionné.





Chanel went ahead with the arrangements in Africa. Soon, we had an invitation from Erasto Sanare, the head of The Monduli Pastorist District Initiative (MPDI). MPDI's mission is to improve the standard of living of the Maasai in Monduli District, while preserving the rich culture of the Maasai people.

Like all good ideas with no money, this remained just an idea – until September 2006, when Dave Morris, managing partner in Vesta Networks, came on board. Dave and his wife Nancy committed to our fundraising, and we decided we would go to Tanzania in July 2007, a very short ten months away. Dave assured us that the money would be there.

And with that, the groundwork began. We had a telephone conference with Sanare in Monduli, Tanzania, one Sunday morning – quite an experience: Dave and I in Toronto, Chanel in Australia, and Sanare in Tanzania. The people in Monduli were very excited. Sanare revealed their plans: we would visit five to ten villages and meet with the local teachers. We would also do an orientation in Monduli and a closing workshop and photo gallery. We promised to add a photo gallery here, in Toronto.

Dave and his team moved ahead on fundraising. They planned an event in June 2007, called Comedy for Cameras. The evening featured a silent auction, a number of stand-up comedians, singers, and dancers.

Our team of teachers began planning the logistics for delivering our workshops in the villages. Everything would have to run on batteries (cameras and printers), we would need adapters to recharge at night, and we would have to create two 'kits' of gear that could easily travel to and return from the villages. At the same time, Chanel was busy arranging trucks, accommodations, translators, and schedules for our two weeks with the Maasai.

Our strategy for the workshops was embarrassingly simple:

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We decided to take 24 point and shoot HP cameras and 16 printers, rechargeable batteries and alkaline backups, and power converters.

Our strategy for the workshops was embarrassingly simple: take a photo of the things that are important to your heart, come back to the circle, and tell the story of your photo. Our philosophy was grounded in the education technique of starting from where people are. In the Story Circle, participants would be able to reflect on their own memories and life circumstances as well as on those of others in the group, thus building connections and solidarity. We worked with villagers to explain how the photographs related to their emotional experience.

The Center for Digital Storytelling has this to say:

1. Sharing stories in a group can be transformative. An abundance of academic literature and anecdotal evidence from trauma studies and global movements for justice has made it clear that speaking one's truth to a listening audience can have a profound impact on a person's ability to thrive, sustain mutually healthy and loving relationships, and make a difference in the world.
2. Media has an important role to play in the promotion of social and economic justice. Hearing a story and watching it unfold with images often moves viewers more deeply than does simply reading words on a page. Making a beautiful piece of visual art out of an experience of human suffering can give dignity to pain and inspire compassion and action.¹

On July 1, 2007, with initial funding from Research in Motion and Merit Travel and support of more than 300 family and friends, our team (now eight Canadians) met Chanel Croker in the small town of Monduli, Tanzania (a two hour drive from Mt. Kilamanjaro) with the purpose of teaching digital storytelling in Maasai villages.



To the village elders, education is a matter of passing down experiences – a custom deeply rooted in the Maasai culture.

to teach other villages and sustain the project well into the future. In all, Village Galleries left behind 24 cameras and printers, four laptops, plenty of ink and paper, and many smiling faces!

The Maasai are a strong, massively warm, smart (the speed with which they learned was remarkable), and proud people who are very committed to progressing, but are equally committed to progressing without deterioration to their culture and beliefs.

To the village elders, education is a matter of passing down experiences – a custom deeply rooted in the Maasai culture. The elders seemed to understand that modern technology is here to stay, but they have made the choice not to let it run over their culture. Notably, the elders – and especially the teachers – regarded the digital photography project as a way to balance the use of technology with their ancient practice of storytelling. Given technology that would allow them to record – not to be recorded – the Maasai became totally immersed in telling their stories. We wanted photos to take a natural place in their oral culture – and it worked. ¹

JEFF YOUNG is a veteran teacher of 30 years and a skilled digital photographer. In addition he works extensively in Adobe Flash, Dreamweaver, and Photoshop. He also designs web sites (www.jeffx.org) and interactive educational CD ROMs. Jeff's photography can be viewed at www.jeffreyys.com.

The team that traveled to Tanzania include: Aaron Bieman, Rob Cook, Chanel Crocker, James Crocker, Dave Morris, Brett Morris, Heather Morrison, Jeff Young, and Nathan Young.

The photos in this article are a product of the Village Galleries project and are used here with permission.

Note

¹ Center for Digital Storytelling, www.storycenter.org/