

# “the Open House – a bedtime story”

PHOTO ESSAY – by Richard Caceres

## What was “the Open House”?:

At UC Santa Cruz in Porter College, the art themed college out of the campus' total ten colleges, there is an art gallery space called “The Bridge Gallery”. At the beginning of each quarter there is a lottery where students can enter to reserve this gallery space for a week. A senior named Jamie Burkart won the slot for Friday April 7<sup>th</sup> 2006 through Sunday April 16<sup>th</sup> 2006. He would not settle for the conventional usage of the gallery however. Instead, he allowed anyone to bring their own artwork into the gallery and put it up wherever they chose – in was an open gallery. Furthermore, and this is the part that really bent the rules, he allowed anyone to live in this creative living space – it was also an open house. He named his exhibition “the Open House’.

While setting up the gallery Friday afternoon Jamie didn't know what to expect. He could only hope that he was able to facilitate a creative atmosphere. At 7:00<sup>PM</sup> sharp on the day the gallery opened, a young family of five – a father, mother, and three children from the ages of two through eight showed up to live in this free home. Cautious, friendly, and also in need of a place to stay, the family embraced the opportunity and became housemates at “the Open House”. At the time of “the Open House”, they had been living in Santa Cruz for six months since they left their home state in the Southeast.

Throughout the night, many people brought their own artwork, and many passer-bys stopped in to see what was going on. Jamie planted the seed, and people organized and turned “the Open House” into a wonderful place. Throughout the week, students and also non students organized pot lucks, musical performances, and even an Easter Egg painting with the family's children on the last day the gallery was open. “the Open House” was open twenty-four hours a day for the entire week, which was different from usual exhibitions that are only open when the university pays someone to sit and watch the space.

During the week of “the Open House”, I spent as much time as I could there everyday and even slept over one night. As I got to know the father, mother, and children, we became comfortable with each other, and, more importantly, we trusted each other. They did not feel ashamed to be living in the gallery space, and also had a positive attitude during the entire event. They participated, created art, and also shared many ideas and stories with the rest of household. Even though I heavily photographed and documented the event, I was still an emerged participant. I enjoyed my self at the event, and made many new friends.

## Reflection:

The creation of my first photo essay, “the Open House – a bedtime story”, was the means for me to practice and apply the ethical, technical, and creative techniques that I was exposed to in the course “Social Documentation”. This process provided insight and its outcome, a completed photo essay that has social implications and also is something I am proud of.

Rather than attempting to justly represent the entire event that occurred, I focused on the family that passed through “the Open House”. My photo essay uses poetic and participatory documentary elements, and attempts to present the event from an angle that could be interpreted as a child of the family’s experience of “the Open House” – hence the title, “the Open House – a bedtime story”. My hope is that this perspective will elucidate meaning from these events.

Some of the social implications in the essay that could stimulate dialog are:

- Ask yourself why this family had to live in a student art gallery, and also why they were ok with it
- Reconsider how you treat each moment of your life. Are you consciously aware of the moment? – be a performance artist in your life
- Rethink your balance between public and private – open your doors and hearts
- Be exposed to other ways of socializing other than typical inebriation parties
- Discover the uniting power of creativity
- Discover creativity’s power to shift thinking and expose new frames of reference

The process of creating this photo essay personalized the ethics that are inherent in the creation of a documentary. For example, when I was thinking about how I was going to represent “the Open House”, I dealt with the triangular relationship between the documentarian, the subject, and the audience that Bill Nichols describes in *Introduction to Documentary*<sup>1</sup>. I defined my subject, the family at “the Open House”, and my audience, anyone who is a participant in culture. I did not want to exploit the family, but I also wanted to tell their story. In order to get their permission, I invited them to San Lorenzo Park and had a small picnic and a nice long conversation/ interview with them that eventually led to the proposal of my topic. They quickly agreed and happily signed release forms. I took photographs that day in the park, but

---

<sup>1</sup> Nichols, Bill – *Introduction to Documentary*, 2001, Indiana University Press

did not include any of them in the final photo essay, because I chose to limit my scope to only the moment in time that was “the Open House”.

Technically, this project has also been a learning process, because I had never used a darkroom until this quarter. My TA convinced me to use the most difficult of the papers, matte fiber, but I now am glad to say I know how to make decent prints. Since I am a digital media person, I scanned all my negatives onto the computer so I could have the ease of editing my essay on the computer without having to make a bunch of extra prints. Eventually, I sent my photos from the computer over the internet to a company that turned my digital scans into slides. Those are the photos that I will project in class. I did however; also make darkroom prints of the photos in my essay, which I am pleased with. It was difficult to use fiber, but I believe the results were worth it.

Overall, this project has been a fulfilling learning experience, and has inspired me to create more documentaries like this in the future.