
Walking Forward While Looking Backward

Sewanee professor wins a fellowship to develop a course that uses photography to build community resilience.

PROFESSOR OF ART PRADIP MALDE—a man who has spent his life studying, teaching, and practicing photography—says one of the best things about taking photos is that anybody can do it. Hand somebody a camera, show them which button to push and suddenly they're a photographer. And, as Malde sees it, it's that simplicity that can make photography a core building block for community development.

"When one person shows a photograph to another, they start talking," Malde says. "If the taking of a photograph and the sharing of a photograph are combined in a planned way, in a strategic way, you can quickly see that it onion-skins out to begin to build links between people and communities, and that begins to go further out to create a sense of identity in communities."

Malde has used these simple ideas about the power of photography as the basis for community-development projects in Haiti and in Grundy County, Tennessee, for years.

Now he has been awarded a fellowship from the Algernon Sydney Sullivan Foundation to further his work in Grundy County by developing a new course focusing on social innovation and entrepreneurship.

By most measures, Grundy County is the poorest county in the state, with social and economic challenges that range from poverty to drug addiction to limited access to healthcare. A number of Sewanee civic-engagement programs are addressing some of the challenges faced by residents of Grundy County by focusing on education and community and family resilience. Photography is a key component in some of these efforts, as families are given cameras and photo instruction to document their lives.

"Family albums and family journals, multiplied several times over by neighborhoods, begin to create a very valuable archive," says Malde. "Families and communities can begin to look back at themselves and they do what I think of as 'walking forward looking backward.' As they see where they're coming from, they get a sense of where they need to go. They begin to identify patterns that are about robustness or resilience or susceptibility. As they become more aware of any of those, they may be better able to articulate their needs to themselves and to other agencies and to actively participate in their futures by looking back."

Students in Malde's new class, Photography and Community Innovation, will be challenged to seek out innovative approaches to social and economic challenges while spending time with families in Grundy County, even doing home-stays. The students will develop their own community development projects that incorporate photography.



Willa Mae's, Lloyd's, and Alan's hands as they look through family photographs, Grundy County, Tennessee. Photo by Pradip Malde

Malde imagines one example: A student who hopes to address maternal health issues in Grundy County might work with grandmothers who are helping their daughters raise young children. The grandmothers could use cameras to document their experiences and the collection would be archived and shared during community discussions of the issues, which could lead to innovative solutions.

"How do you go out into a community and begin to engage with individuals in order to identify larger issues and concerns and then find solutions to them?" Malde asks. "You need to envision a solution and then to find approaches to that solution. What do we aspire to? Now let's work toward that using the evidence that we have gathered from photography and discussions and journals."

Malde plans to teach the first section of the new course during summer school 2017.