

Shooting for truth

BY JENN SHARP, BRIDGES JANUARY 11, 2012

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Nayan Sthankiya.

Photograph by: Andrew Spearin, Bridges

Glimpses of humanity amid utter chaos drive Nayan Sthankiya to some of the world's most dangerous places.

The Saskatoon-based photojournalist has spent the last decade visiting disaster-stricken and war-torn countries in search of a story, giving voices to the voiceless. In a profession that draws thrill seekers, Sthankiya admits he's a true adrenalin junkie. But there's more to it than that.

On Boxing Day 2004, the world was reeling at the destruction wrought by a tsunami in South East Asia. It was the first disaster zone Sthankiya would visit in his career.

He journeyed to Banda Aceh, Indonesia, the city closest to the epicentre of the underwater earthquake, a city that lost half of its population in mere hours. Witnessing the power of nature was an experience that changed Sthankiya forever.

"The town is gone; there's nothing. There's no craters, no debris. The sea came in, took everything and took it all out. It was mind-boggling," he says.

In the midst of a decimated city full of floating corpses, Sthankiya encountered some men who had found a sea turtle 16 kilometres inland. Turtles are sacred in the Indonesian culture and the group was rushing to get this one back to the sea. Sthankiya jumped in the back of their van with the turtle and photographed the mad drive through the destruction to save the creature's life.

"Prior to that, it had been (a sea of) dead bodies everywhere. Bodies that are deteriorating. The smell. That's something you don't forget — ever. But to see this live turtle going back to where it came from was pretty poignant," he says.

GENETIC IMPRINTS

Adventure is in the 43-year-old Sthankiya's blood. He was born in Uganda where his parents owned a large plantation. As soon as he could walk, he would leave the compound and venture to the nearest town, over two kilometres away. The townspeople always brought him home.

"I was searching and adventuring all the time. It seems like something that's been genetically imprinted on me."

Sthankiya's family is from Gujarat, an Indian province that was Mahatma Gandhi's birthplace. Gujarat is also home to some of the largest businesses in India. Sthankiya's grandfather, father and uncles were all entrepreneurs. In the mid-1960s, many Indians were moving to Africa to start sugar cane, coffee and tobacco plantations. Sthankiya, who speaks smatterings of Hindi, Gujarati, French, Spanish and Korean, was born in Uganda in 1968. A year later, civil war broke out and the Indians were told to leave everything and get out of the country. After a few years in England, the family immigrated to Canada and settled in Saskatoon. His dad and three brothers would later open two IGA grocery stores, in Martensville and Warman.

His family's entrepreneurial spirit has greatly influenced his career. Sthankiya has always been a freelancer, a career he says gives him the freedom to choose which projects and stories he works on. His work has been published in Maclean's, Canadian Geographic, The Wall Street Journal and The Globe and Mail to name a few.

BEHIND THE LENSE

Sthankiya worked for Canadian Geographic last summer, exploring the Grasslands National Park in southwest Saskatchewan with the magazine's managing editor Dan Rubinstein.

"His pictures and eye for detail are great — and he was a great guy to hang out with when heavy rain forced us to hunker down in a park ranger's house for a day. That, and the fact that Nayan was cool with getting up at 4 a.m. to record the sounds of sunrise, give me a lot of respect for him."

Sthankiya's eye for detail has been cultivated over a number of years. He has a BFA from the Alberta College of Art where he studied drawing, sculpture, painting and photography.

"I look at (photography) from a fine art perspective but with the reality that this is journalism — it still needs to tell a story that's not made up," he says.

Clare Jordan, director of photography at the Globe and Mail, says she found Sthankiya's website while researching Saskatoon-based photographers for an assignment. He lacked published magazine experience at the time but she was impressed by his storytelling abilities.

"It turned out he landed the cover with that shoot. And since, has gone on to shoot a number of other assignments for me. I'm continually impressed with his originality of composition and fresh spin beyond the expected. He's become my go-to guy for Saskatoon," she says.

Sthankiya's daily uniform consists of hiking boots, khaki pants and an Arcteryx jacket. His face appears younger than his years but his eyes hint at his sometimes harrowing experiences.

"If you're a journalist, it's an important job," he says. "It's as important as a lawyer or a doctor or anybody with responsibility. If you're not taking that responsibility seriously then you should get out of the business."

He's annoyed that Canadians have heard next to no stories about what's happened in Afghanistan since our military has been in the country.

"The story is always about soldiers and yes that's an important story, but you don't hear about the regular people. It's dangerous and there's costs involved. But so is war. And so is journalism."

THE RUSH

Sthankiya knows all about the costs of journalism. Last year, two of his friends died in Libya. They were hiding behind the railing of a bridge when a mortar shell hit the area. They were killed by shrapnel.

Sthankiya has had his own close calls. Along with the tsunami, he covered the earthquake in Pakistan and war zones in Afghanistan and Iraq. Why do journalists risk their lives to get a story?

"I think war correspondents in general, if they're really honest, will say it's a rush. I think to say it's not a rush would be disingenuous. How could it not be? Bullets are whizzing by, people are shooting at you," he says.

"I think if that's the only reason you're there, it's a problem. You're not necessarily doing the story justice if that is your main reason to go."

THE REAL NORTH KOREA

One of Sthankiya's most eye-opening experiences came in 2006 when spent two weeks in North Korea. In a rare moment of openness, the government let the journalists leave the beaten path and to take pictures. Sthankiya taught English in South Korea for nine years before the trip and had learned enough Korean to be able to talk to people when he was out of earshot of the tour "minders." He says most people were disillusioned with the current state of North Korea and Kim Jong-il.

"They all loved his father Kim Il-sung. He was there during the (Korean) war and basically kept North Korea together. At that time, the North was supplying food and aid to South Korea after the war. Now it's completely different — that's also something most people don't know. South Korea was beat all to hell after the war."

Despite government propaganda and a censored Internet, Sthankiya says the people are not completely oblivious.

"They know somewhat what's happening in the rest of the world and that they're way behind the times. There's not much they can do about it except hope that things change or try and defect to America or South Korea."

Freelance Spanish journalist Bruno Galindo says he learned a lot from Sthankiya on the North Korean trip. It was "an extremely delicate situation" where both he and Sthankiya were trying to extract information.

"Working with him was a joyful thing, a cool experience in non-verbal language (just think how obedient and discrete you need to be in that rare case of being inside North Korea)," he wrote in an email to Bridges.

Since Kim Jong-il's death on December 17, 2011, Sthankiya has been critical of the international media coverage. He says the North Korean people have been portrayed as "deranged sycophants" but that many are happy and looking to a better future.

"If you are raised in a propaganda society where every moment of your life revolves around a person and an ideology, and that person is then gone, trauma will ensue. I was subjected to that 24-hour propaganda and it was tough to take coming from a democratic society, but I can see how year after year it would change your views."

THE ROAD AHEAD

Sthankiya says it's probably time for him to settle down and find a steady job with health benefits and a pension plan. On the other hand, he loves his lifestyle and the freedom that comes with being his own boss.

"But then I really think about it (and) I can't work for idiots. If I see or feel something that's really unjust I tend to speak my mind about it. Sometimes to my detriment. I think that's a journalistic vent. I don't take fools lightly."

The possibility of dying while on assignment is one of the risks of his job, and he approaches the subject frankly.

"I've done what I could do on this planet. I tried to tell the stories that I could tell and do the right thing. I'm not a banker screwing over people left and right. I'm trying to do the best that I can and leave my mark in a better way — I'm not trying to take but to give something back."

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