

For decades, teens from Cambridge public housing documented the neighborhood

Using borrowed cameras and a basement darkroom they made photos of daily life that hold poignant memories today.

By Alexa Mills November 25, 2015, 12:08 p.m.



Eddie Cruz (left) and his former Community Art Center teacher Robert "Bird" Bridgeman, who gave Cruz the chance to DJ at Newtowne Court, hold photos of themselves. ARAM BOGHOSIAN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE



Almost all of the photos are undated, and the only way to identify the people in them is to show the pictures to those who grew up in the neighborhood. Then names and memories flow. ARAM BOGHOSIAN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

The teenagers had an assignment: Reenact old photographs of the neighborhood kids.

It wasn't an easy task. One photo had a factory in the background. Had that factory been torn down? Another showed a grassy field. Was there a building on top of that field now?

The photos — deteriorating 8-by-12 prints developed in the basement darkroom of a public housing project — are some 20, 30, even 40 years old. The neighborhood — alternately called “The Port” and “Area Four,” depending on which generation or entity wants to claim it — is the area in and around Cambridge’s Kendall Square.

The teenagers know, by heart, the Kendall of 2015, with its tree-lined sidewalks and careful bike lanes. Kendall Square is the gleaming, expanding international tech hub next door to MIT and about a mile and a half from Harvard. Google, Microsoft, Facebook, Genzyme, Novartis, Biogen, and a host of ambitious startups all keep offices in Kendall. Amenity rich residential buildings with ground-floor cafes complete a new neighborhood in one of the wealthiest cities in the state.

But back when the oldest photos were taken, there was little sign of what was to come. For decades this neighborhood was a patchwork of empty lots and low-slung factory buildings between the Charles River and the Newtowne Court and Washington Elms housing projects. Kids had the run of it on their bikes.

So the teenagers set out over the new landscape, looking for the old one they saw in the photos. Sometimes they found the right spot, sometimes they didn't. But each time they settled in to reenact a photo, they had no trouble imitating the kids of old Cambridge.

Kiara Osiris, 16, chose a photo of onetime high school basketball star, now youth coach, Carol Thomas, shown on a street corner, one outstretched arm against a building, the other angled on her hip. "This photo inspired me," Osiris wrote, "because it showed a proud black woman standing in her community, being herself." Osiris did not find the spot where Thomas had stood, but the two bear a similar pose and expression, bridging decades.

<https://www.bostonglobe.com/magazine/2015/11/25/for-decades-teens-from-cambridge-public-housing-documented-neighborhood/0pHIOXoQacAUOujxpfTGN/story.html> 2/5



Carol Thomas (left) in an old photo reenacted by Kiara Osiris (right), who was inspired by the image of a "proud black woman . . . being herself." LEFT: THE COMMUNITY ART CENTER; RIGHT: NAYTHEN LOWE/LEFT: THE COMMUNITY ART CENTER INC.; RIGHT: NAYTHEN LOWE

The teen photographers, past and present, had something important in common: They borrowed the cameras from the Community Art Center, a Cambridge institution that has offered art classes to children continuously since 1937. For most of those years, the Art Center was in the sprawling basement of Newtowne Court, one of the first and oldest public housing developments in the country. Together with Washington Elms, the neighboring projects comprise close to 450 apartments.

By the mid-1960s, the Polaroid Corp. surrounded the projects on three sides, operating mostly out of former factory buildings. Polaroid cameras were the coolest gadgets on the market. They could spit out photos on glossy paper within seconds.

Art Center staff took note of the juxtaposition — Polaroid and the projects — and asked the company next door to donate cameras, film, and more. Two Harvard work-study students at the center, Paul Weinberg and Gene Mazel, asked Polaroid for money to build a darkroom; they believed traditional film was superior to instant. Polaroid obliged.

Bianca Mercado (right) reenacts a photo of Karen Kehoe Beato. LEFT: KAREN KILBURN; RIGHT: DEMETRIUS PASQUALE

The children of the Art Center began photographing their lives, and they have never stopped. The result: a collection of photographs documenting life in and around public housing, as seen through the eyes of the kids who lived there. Their photos are, nearly without exception, joyful. Kids who could claim all the hardships of growing up poor captured stickball games and wheelie-popping competitions in the project yards, block parties, and field trips. They took coming-of-age portraits of their friends.

Tyrone Bellitti grew up in Newtowne Court in the 1980s, learned photography in the project's basement, traveled the

world as a photographer, and still teaches an occasional photography class for Art Center teens today. He remembers the housing projects this way:

“It was totally a dump when I was growing up. And it was depressing. And the Art Center was a beacon of light. There wasn’t one kid who didn’t know about it. No one would try and steal your camera, because they knew where it came from. Now, had it been different and that program didn’t exist, and you’re walking around with a hundred-dollar camera around your neck? ‘Yeah. Gimme that. I’ll take that.’ That camera would turn into a pair of shoes.”

Twins Tico (left) and Daco Garcia play basketball in the projects while Rainier Rosado looks on. TYRONE BELLITTI

Bellitti used that camera, every day after school and all summer long, to produce a record of his youth. The same is true for his friends, and their friends.

Take Eddie Cruz. He keeps a photo of himself from the summer of 1985, taken on one of those days in a teenager’s life that proves momentous for a lifetime. It shows him in the yard at Newtowne Court, working his first paid DJ gig. He’d been saving money from jobs at Purity Supreme and the New England Aquarium to buy his first set of turntables. That day would help launch a full-time career in the music industry that would last 10 years.

Cruz had more than music on his mind, though. Namely, Ranelle Garro. “I was so crushing on her,” he says. Cruz set up his DJ table directly across from her apartment window. “I positioned myself right there just to impress her, hoping she would look.”

Garro did love the DJ back. But their lives were tumultuous. It would be nearly a decade before the two became a couple for good. Now he’s got that photo hanging up in their house. “My kids have heard me tell the story so many times,” Cruz says. “They’re like ‘Yeah, Dad. You set up your turntables so mom could see you.’ ”

Cruz found photos and negatives of that day stacked among hundreds, possibly thousands, in an Art Center cabinet nearly as tall as he is. Almost all of the photos are undated, few include the photographer’s name, and the only way to identify the people in them is to show the pictures to those who grew up in the neighborhood. Then names and memories flow.

The Art Center and its alumni are undertaking this work now, laying out photos before people who grew up in the neighborhood, recording the names and stories. They are planning to curate their collection, and to complete it. Some decades are sparser than others. Hundreds more photos are likely stored in the basements and closets of former Art Center kids and teachers who kept their favorites.

Sheikh Noohery (right) reenacts a photo of Jerome Prince. LEFT: THE COMMUNITY ART CENTER; RIGHT: NAYTHEN LOWE

The Art Center — which has moved out of Newtowne Court and across the street into a building once owned by Polaroid — wants to find these people and work with them again, to use their photos to help preserve the history of a neighborhood and to keep generations connected.

That’s what the teens were doing this summer, as they reenacted the old photos. Looking at their work, and the work of their predecessors, the teens came up with an idea: Art Center kids could reenact the photos every 20 years, or even every five, like a chain.

The people in the old photos have ideas, too. The Men of the Port, whose middle-aged members grew up in the neighborhood, throw an annual summer block party at Newtowne Court. In 2014, one of those men, Omo Moses, arranged to have hundreds of photocopies of the photographs and a large board set up next to a DJ table. People could paste images to the board, making a collage. It was a wildly popular exhibit.

“Ongoing,” Moses says. “I think we could have a living document and a memorial to the people we cared about and [who] were important to the community.”

Looking at this record of their childhood can be bittersweet for people of the neighborhood. They find too many photos of friends who died young, from addictions or disease. Some see a city they loved but had to leave because rents in Cambridge are so high.

But they also remember a time when they could find all of their best friends in the yard at Newtowne Court; when they would rush down to the basement darkroom and spend hours bathing their film in chemicals, hanging the images to dry, watching for the faces to appear.