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Lifestyle

G FORCE

Photographer poet follows migrant workers at Suffolk Downs

By Linda Matchan | GLOBE STAFF SEPTEMBER 24, 2012



WENDY MAEDA/GLOBE STAFF

WHO

Melissa Shook

WHAT

Shook has been a photographer, she estimates, “for a thousand years,” specializing in personal documentary; she taught photography at Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the University of Massachusetts Boston. Her subjects have included homelessness, aging, and, now, the all-but-invisible world behind Suffolk Downs, the backside workers at the racetrack. She documents the lives of these migrant workers in “My Suffolk Downs,” a new book of poetry and photographs. Proceeds go to The Eighth Pole, a 22-year-old human services program that provides health care, substance abuse counseling, and other social services for backside workers.

Q. How did you become a photographer?

A. I grew up on Long Island and my mother died when I was 12, in 1951. I can’t say things got better. My father drank a good deal. I realized when I was 16 I couldn’t remember my mother. No one mentioned her. She had cancer and people didn’t talk about cancer then. When my daughter Krissy was born, I found myself taking pictures of her and of our life. Later I realized the reason I was photographing her was that I only knew what my mother looked like through snapshots. My moving into photography was because of my own obsession.

Q. What did you photograph initially?

A. I photographed Krissy for 18 years. She was the main focus of my work. I also did a series of self-portraits. The Modern [Museum of Modern Art in New York] bought some of those; they were in a show in 1973. They bought some of the Krissy prints. I became a legitimate photographer with two subjects. The day Krissy graduated from high school, she said, “No more photographs.”

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Q. Then what?

A. I started volunteering at Pine Street [Inn] as a counselor in the women's unit. I loved hearing their stories. I'm not fazed by chaos, like many children who grew up in alcoholic families. I can listen to a large amount of distress without absorbing it. That led to a series of photographs called "Streets Are for Nobody" — portraits of women who had been homeless, and interviews with them.

Q. What drew you to Suffolk Downs?

A. I'd heard that [Boston] Health Care for the Homeless sent nurses out to the back side of Suffolk Downs because there was a whole group of people who had no access to health providers. All I could think of was: how am I going to get [in] there? I was interested in how people survive who are outside the safety net of services, who don't have regular doctor's visits, who have no access to the care they needed. Also, I had a friend who claimed a horse and I got invited to the back side to photograph it. It was as close to heaven as I'm going to get. I love being there.

Q. Explain "back side?"

A. It's also called the back stretch. It is really a migrant labor camp. People work as grooms, or hot-walkers or exercise riders or trainers, or [they] muck out the stalls. Or they're people who bring in the hay. There is a whole support system that is geared to caring for this creature that is called the thoroughbred. I wasn't interested in the gambling side of it, or the thoroughbred business. I was interested in those people who don't have a lot of money and often live on the back side in a small dormitory or a tack room.

Q. Where do they come from?

A. Peru or Puerto Rico or North Carolina or Ohio — a number of places. There is a large Spanish-speaking population, though the trainers tend to be white American men. When Suffolk Downs closes in late October or early November, most of those people will go on to the next track. They go from track to track.

Q. What kind of people are drawn to this work?

A. There are definitely folks on the back side who aren't going to fit into any other job.

They make wonderful horse men. They like the animals, they work hard, and they fit into this kind of floating society. If Suffolk Downs was granted a casino license, it would improve the lives of backside workers, because the purses would go up. There would be more money around. I think that would raise some of those poor little boats.

Q. Why does the track appeal to you?

A. It's quite amazing to be in a business where an equine ambulance is always there, always at the ready. It's a world where people accept danger, and live with a sense of death and injury most people couldn't imagine in the real world.

Interview was condensed and edited. Linda Matchan can be reached at l_matchan@globe.com.

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