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Issue 127 June 2018

US \$7.95 Can \$9.95

John Partipilo: Finding the Light

**Colleen
Creamer**

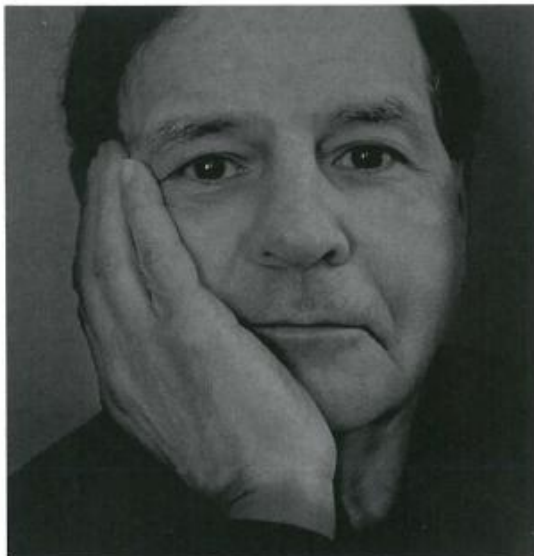
Long before the honors, before his chronicling of the Iraq War, the post-inaugural Women's March and a host of issues pertaining to equity such as DACA and the homeless, photojournalist John Partipilo began paving his way toward social justice. The genesis story regarding his career in photography involves sneaking a Brownie camera into his Catholic elementary school in Illinois to document the spanking of kids by the nuns.

"They, of course, confiscated my camera," Partipilo recalls, laughing. "The nuns sent me home with a letter. When my mom saw the note, she asked me if I felt strongly about it, and I told her I did. 'OK. That's good,' she said. 'You should always do things you feel strongly about.'"

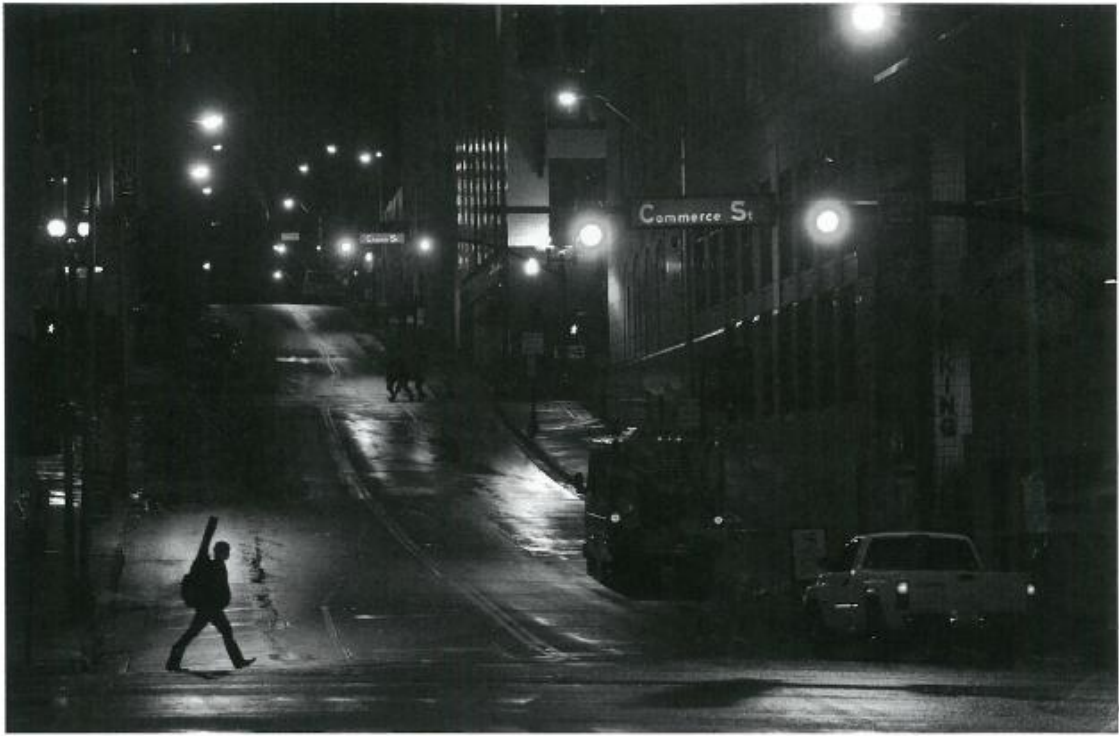
The nuns may not have been impressed with Partipilo's sense of fair play, but the incident instilled in him a taste for justice that

shows no signs of abating. Partipilo spent 35 years developing his craft while a staff photojournalist for daily newspapers, the last 17 years in the service of *The Tennessean* in Nashville. As a rule, he would push for enough bandwidth to do socially relevant frontline series, which earned him a slew of awards and nominations, including two for the Pulitzer Prize. He had to be able to tell a story immediately, and so became adroit at creating densely communicative compositions while quickly gaining his subjects' trust.

His series *Gangs of Middle Tennessee* earned Best of Photojournalism 2011 from the National Press Photographer's Association and First Place from NPPA for Multiple Feature. That a number of gangs, including Bloods and Crips and the Hispanic gangs The Disciples and Sur 13, had been active and recruiting in high schools in Middle Tennessee took many by surprise. The series was a six-month-long deep dive that needed the faces of gang members to not only brace the narrative but to also humanize the cost of poverty to those who live in it and those who are casualties of it. Partipilo got access to Sur 13 while riding along with the Nashville Police Department's gang unit. He wound up in the back of a patrol car with a female gang member who had just been arrested.



John Partipilo



Musician, Nashville, 2016



Skulls Rainbow Room, Nashville, 2016



Rural Tennessee, Sumner County, 2013

“As a photojournalist, I think it’s imperative that you find stories and tell stories and share stories that people may not be aware of.”

“She told me, ‘They are never going to talk to you.’ She had asked [officers] for some water, and they ignored her, but I had a bottle with me, so I gave it to her,” Partipilo says. “At the same time, I handed her my card, and that is what got me in. She talked to the main guy, the guy who was running the whole thing. One act of kindness goes a long way. After the gang story came out, so many people came up to me and said, ‘I had no idea this was going on here.’ As a photojournalist, I think it’s imperative that you find stories and tell stories and share stories that people may not be aware of.”

Partipilo was on staff at *The Tennessean* when days of record rain caused the historic May 2010 flood. The editorial staff of the paper was nominated for a Pulitzer in 2011 for their coverage, but it was Partipilo’s images that captured the widespread devastation of what was termed a “1,000-year flood,” one that immersed Nashville’s historic downtown core in rooftop-high muddy floodwaters. (His first Pulitzer Prize nomination was for a series he did on sharecropping for the *Arkansas Gazette* in the late 1970s.) “All of us were working around the clock,” Partipilo recalls of his work on the flood story. “We were running around wading in water up to our necks. I heard there were people holed

up at this motel, and I climbed up to the second floor. When I got in there I heard music, and then I looked over the banister and shot this guy literally swimming to his car. The scene was so surreal.”

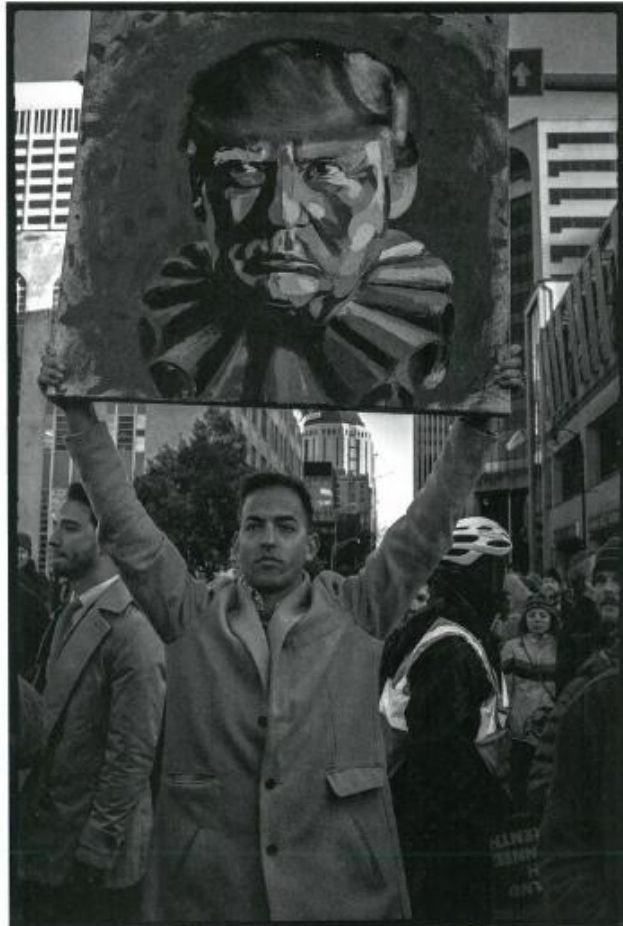
In addition to their sense of drama and emotion, Partipilo’s photographs are distinguished by their lush tonalities, so rich they appear almost as a pastiche of oil painting. This is due in part to setting his digital camera to black-and-white with a yellow filter setting. He learned long ago when shooting film to expose for the shadows, and always used a yellow filter to increase contrast. Aside from contrast control, the use of showy special effects are of no interest to the veteran storyteller, who shoots RAW and crops in camera without manipulation.

“I am composing a photo, so why shoot something and then have to go back in? That is my approach, because I think that is a truer way to look at things. I might sharpen or lighten or darken in Photoshop, but that’s it. First of all, as a journalist, you are not allowed to do any of that stuff; you can’t erase things; you can’t add things.”

As of 2015, Partipilo has been free from the constraints of having to tell someone else’s narrative and, subsequently, is able to



Crying Girl, DACA March, 2017



Trump Supporter, Nashville, 2017

“If something catches my eye, I react to it, so serendipity is a result of that process.”

photograph what he wants. *Cuba: My World Ends Here* is a photographic essay that shows the shift happening in Cuba and the simplicity of life there documented in three trips Partipilo took between May 2016 and March 2017. Morgan James Publishing released the series as a book earlier this year. While on the island, Partipilo “fell in love with the people.” His fascination with Cuba began with the Cuban Missile Crisis when brinksmanship between the USSR and the U.S. dominated the international news for a couple of riveting weeks in 1962. “I was a kid, but I remember Russian ships were steaming toward the blockade, and all our parents were talking about it,” he says. “I always knew I wanted to go there. There is an inimitable Cuban spirit that people talk about. It’s there. You also feel as though you have stepped back in time.”

His patience and his ability to quickly fit into his surroundings resulted in a bounty of images notable for their depth of insight and detail. While in the town of Santa Clara in the heart of Cuba, he came upon a young woman getting ready to go out. Sensing a photo op, he began photographing her while identifying himself as an American journalist and talking with her to put her at ease. He liked what he was getting, but knew something was miss-

ing visually. He kept shooting, and his persistence was rewarded when a dog wandered into frame right, followed by a little girl popping her head into frame left. He quickly seized the moment, and knew he had captured something unique.

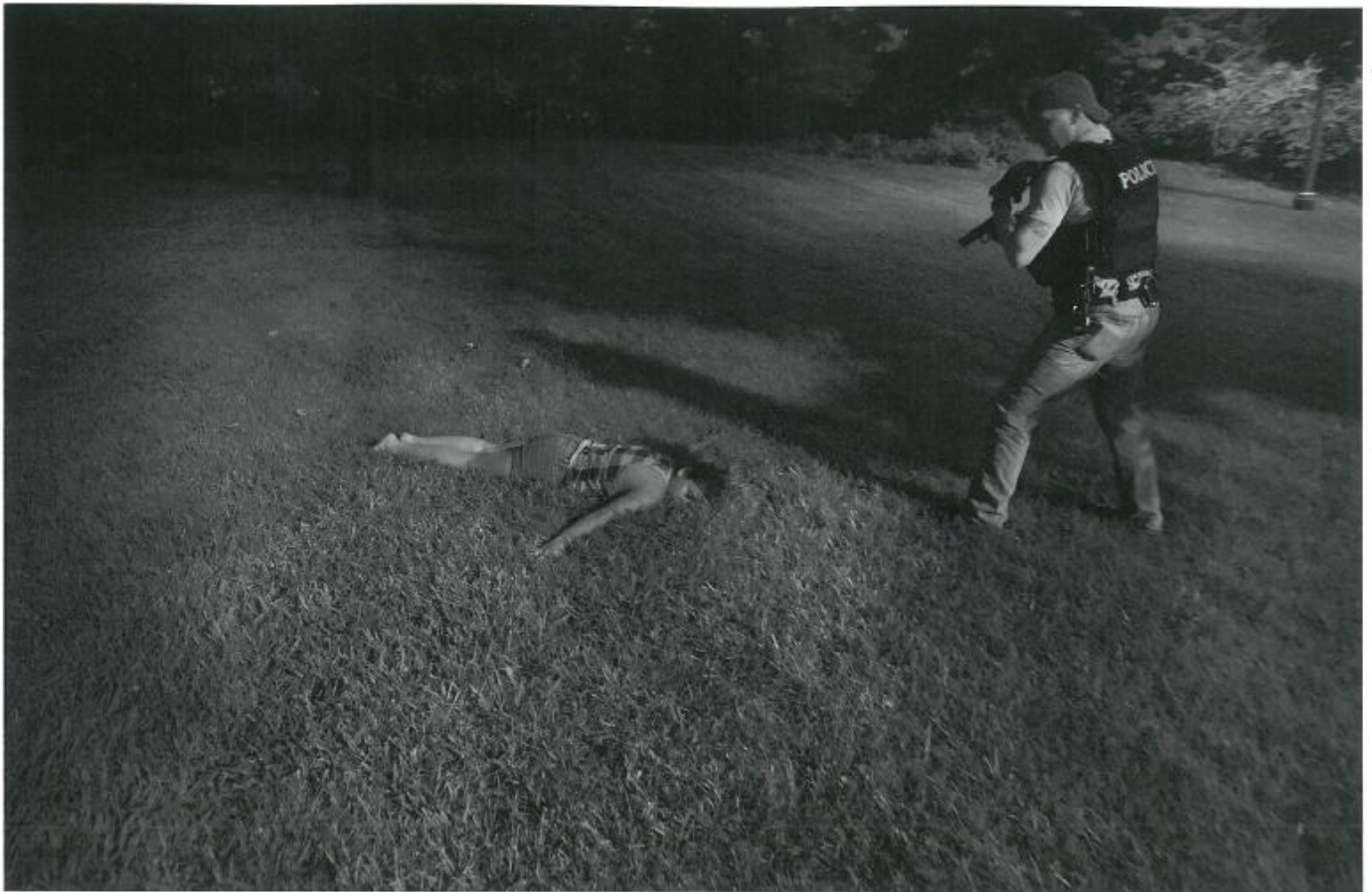
Later, while driving around the countryside, Partipilo spotted a silhouetted group of sugarcane workers in the distance, but by the time he got to them he was almost past the window of opportunity.

“I was in a car, and a guy was driving me, and I saw the picture coming up the road. I told the driver to stop,” Partipilo says. “He slammed on the brakes and said, ‘What’s wrong?’ I told him I’d tell him later, and I jumped out and started running back to this road just as they started to turn the corner. The sun was going down at the end of the day, and that is when I got that picture.”

Such encounters speak to Partipilo’s process—one in which luck’s chances are greatly enhanced by being ever-present. “I walk out there and try not to think about what I’m doing and just react to what is happening, and because I think that way, more moments appear,” he says. “If something catches my eye, I react to it, so serendipity is a result of the process. I have found over the years that



Nashville Flood, 2010



Gang Unit Detective Arrests SUR 13 Gang Member, 2010



Mother Holding Body of Daughter Killed by Gang Member, 2010



Elvis Wedding, Nashville, 2017

“There is an adrenaline rush that can’t be described when I capture something really good, when I capture a beautiful moment in time.”

you can really outthink yourself, but the three things I do think about are composition, light and whether or not the shot is compelling. By that I mean people who have some internal thing going on inside that you can see; there needs to be some kind of emotion that sets it up.”

Partipilo, who grew up mainly in Arkansas and Illinois, has a penchant for being in the right place at the right time, particularly when it comes to protests. He has chronicled the Women’s March, the anti-Trump movement, protests for and against DACA [Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals] and the impact the 2008 housing crash had on the hungry and the homeless in Tennessee. “There are things that just don’t need to be happening,” Partipilo says. “Homelessness doesn’t need to be happening in this country, and people don’t need to be going hungry, especially in this country.”

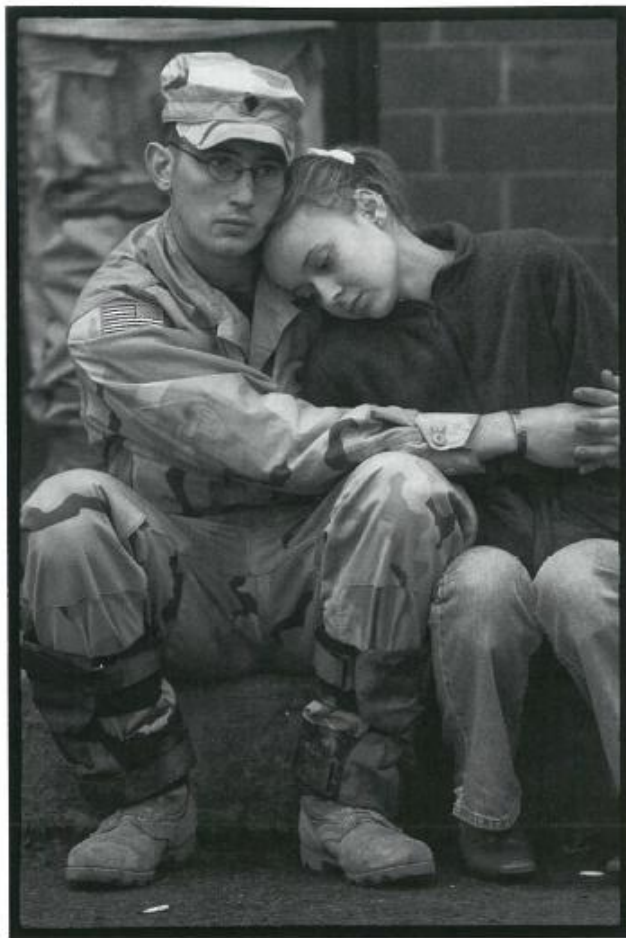
When he heard that a group of young “dreamers” was going to show up at the home offices of Tennessee senators Lamar Alexander and Bob Corker, he claimed a place in the back of the crowd while most other staff photographers were snapping speakers. In the back of the room there was, indeed,

“something going on” in one of the young women attending; there were not only tears on her face but also what appears to be years of fearful fatigue.

Helping Partipilo capture such intimate moments is a small Fujifilm X110F, his preferred street camera. He has two other professional cameras, both Fujis, but it’s the diminutive stealth camera that he uses as a matter of course. Unobtrusive and virtually silent, it allows him to move amongst people who often don’t realize he’s photographing them.

Partipilo is equally adept at finding emotive images of men and women at war. He did two tours embedded with American troops in Iraq for *The Tennessean*. He volunteered for both. “We really had some close calls,” he recalls. “It was terrifying, but I absolutely never felt more alive in my life. Wherever they went, I went. That [the embedment program] was really an Army experiment. I was walking where they walked, sleeping where they slept and flying where they flew. We got ambushed; we were sleeping in blown-out buildings.”

A photojournalism instructor at Nossi College of Art in Nashville, Partipilo teaches a required class for all students getting a degree



Saying Farewell Prior to Operation Iraqi Freedom, 2003



Young Girl at Home, An Najaf, Iraq, 2003

in photography. If some students don't understand how photojournalism can act as a bedrock for other types of photography, Partipilo schools them.

"A few of them say they don't want to be a photojournalist and that they don't want to take this class, and my answer to that is, 'I don't care if you don't want to be a photojournalist, but you're going to have to learn how to deal with people. You are going to have to learn how to put people at ease, you are going to have to learn how to not pull your camera out right away.'"

Always aware of his roots, Partipilo considers himself a "fine-art photographer who has photojournalism as a style." His next project will be photographing the Basque population in Northern Spain. He may again find himself in the midst of unrest, as the Basque, along with the Catalans to the east—who recently pronounced their independence from Spain—have long wanted to be their own country, though that is not the reason he is going.

"I think they are overlooked, and I think their culture, given the Spanish side and the French side, is overlooked. It's really fabulous," Partipilo says. "I am in the middle of a lot of research, because once I start photographing I don't want to think about it; I just

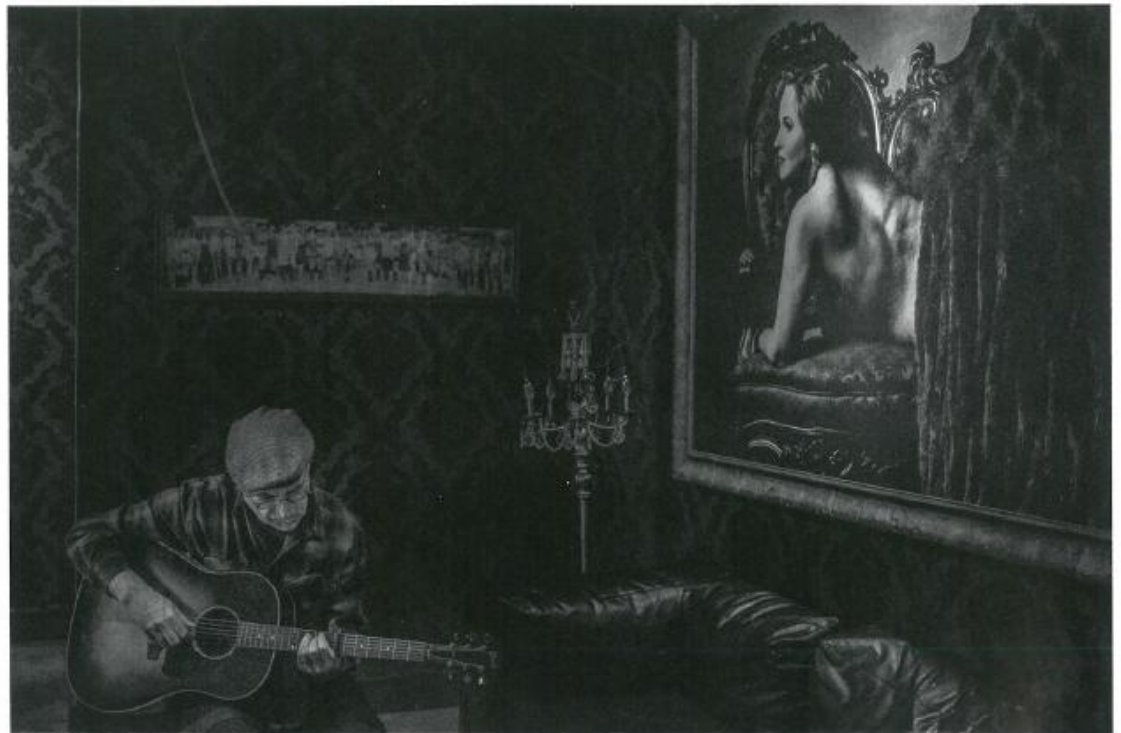
want to be able to react to what is in front of me."

Partipilo has lost none of his longing to create images since his days at Catholic school. In his fifties now, he shoots every day: rain, shine, sleet or snow. When talking about photography, he seems to miss a beat in attempting to explain his love for his craft. Like so many creatives, that answer lies in the work.

"There is an adrenaline rush I get that can't be described when I capture something really good, when I capture a beautiful moment in time. So I am always very aware of the light around me. I am always gauging the light."

Addendum

To see more of Partipilo's work, be sure to visit johnpartipilo.com.



David Olney Backstage at the Suttler, Nashville, 2017



Sugar Cane Workers, Cuba, 2017



Woman Getting Ready for Evening Out, Santa Clara, Cuba, 2017