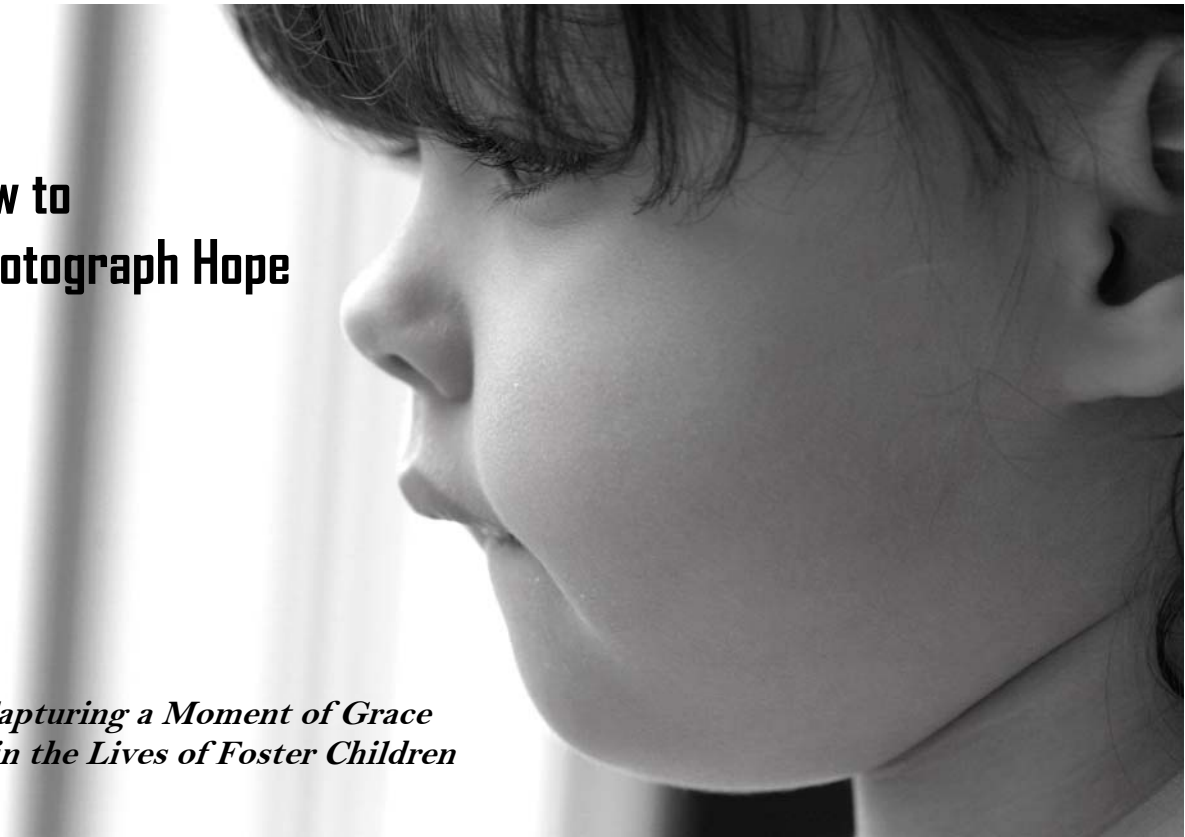


How to Photograph Hope

*Capturing a Moment of Grace
in the Lives of Foster Children*



Shay, 2007

Story and photography by Jesse Miller

I think of each Heart Gallery shoot as a celebrity assignment. There will be unexpected delays, last minute location changes, set and lighting issues, clothing fiascos and then, of course, the toughest challenge still remains - capturing a magical moment in the hectic, emotional life of a child living in foster care. The stakes are high. Our success isn't measured by artistry alone. Rather, we carry the weight of uniting a hopeful child with their forever family.

As one might expect, I've met some tough kids throughout my six years of photographing children in foster care. Teens with an impenetrable lockdown of emotions and younger kids who have prematurely constructed emotional barriers. Yet, just under that tough exterior most often lies an almost tangible emotional vulnerability. Just as concerning as those sulking about with coats of armor are the ones wearing their hearts on their sleeves. Children eager to attach themselves to anyone who gives them attention, readily offering their hearts to the camera with a canned, sellable smile, frame after frame. These astute actors have a different kind of layer. Layers that may be hiding a deeper fear of love and attachment from years of surviving by their demure affectation. But they are so genuinely loveable it's difficult to understand why they're still waiting in the system as is the case with Imani and Savannah.

It has been my experience that the first or the last image taken usually takes the prize. Captures that split second where they let their guard down and, accidentally, show you a slice of their spirit, a millisecond of hope, an expression that holds all the grace, love and loss right there for you to see, just as if you've peeled off all the layers and were holding the very seeds in your hand.

Since I was a child I've always empathized with those looking for a place to belong. Another of my labors of love has been finding homes for stray cats. Though I feel sorry for these wandering and defenseless animals, they keep no pity for themselves. This quality is one that I've found with many younger children in the foster care system whose outlook of their situation is not one of self-pity, but of hope. At some shoots, I'd swear it was radiating out of their every pore, from every space between too-young to be already-capped teeth. They'll ask you within five minutes of your first meeting if you'd like to adopt them, if you'd like to become the most important person in their young lives, and make the biggest commitment you'll ever make to another person in your lifetime. After I've fumbled through an inadequate explanation of why this isn't possible, they'll make this face that's been burned into my heart forever, and then move on to the next visitor, foster parent, court-appointed guardian, or teacher, with that same inextinguishable flash of hope lighting up their eyes.



It's with the teens where things get interesting. It's with them that the rules of engagement change and all of your skills of disarmament are put to the test. They're often moody and hesitant subjects who hate their skin, body type, moles, hair, teeth, smiles, dimples, freckles and,



on top of their normal adolescent angst, must also navigate the tumultuous waters of the foster care system. The common perception of teens in foster care is that the damage done by years of abandonment and neglect have irreversibly hardened their hearts and made them lost causes. In my experience, the opposite is almost always true. They've overcome, and are still battling the difficult and unsettling issues of their young lives. The heartbreaking knowledge of their own unfortunate circumstances creates an even stronger desire to belong. Some teens have developed stable relationships with their foster families and are hesitant to accept the idea of yet another move, yet another family to fit into. Others are reluctant to have their portrait identifying them as a "foster kid" hanging in a local mall where their peers hang out. The photographer's challenge with teens is to penetrate their protective layers to show that despite all they've endured, they still hold a flicker of hope, and to unmask their biggest secret of all: their undeniable desire to be loved.



And what should a Heart Gallery photographer expect? Hours of driving, often beyond county jurisdiction lines, dealing with the hectic schedules of foster parents who are trying to squeeze you in amidst soccer, grocery shopping and five other kids living in the same house. It's not glamorous work. There's no fat pay check coming, no slick publication printing your credit; in fact, due to confidentiality restrictions Heart Gallery photographers aren't even able to post any of their images of the children on their own websites.

What you get instead are years of asking the same question, "I wonder whatever happened to..." And, sometimes, the actual life-affirming knowledge that because of a quick smirk, a flair of vulnerability, someone took this child home to be part of their "forever family". It has a nice ring to it, doesn't it?

My very first Heart Gallery assignment in 2002 was with a young autistic child, Michael. At the time I was still clutching onto my trusty film Nikon which I've shot with for over 20 years, dragging along my cumbersome new digital as backup. It didn't take long for me to learn that my equipment needed to be as flexible as I was for whatever deviations from the plan may occur. And with children who have serious medical conditions confined to hospitals, rooms, or even beds, deviations occur more often than not. Due to his autism, Michael was unable to stay still; I'd sit him in a chair, preparing for this perfectly lit artsy portrait, and as soon as I'd turn around to set up the shot he'd be wrapped around my leg. I had to learn to be fast and flexible, molding my style of photography to fit the needs of the individual children. My then photographic "style" of mood-lit, overly composed, grainy black and white portraiture was traded in for a good cause. It was an artistic sacrifice I quickly accepted as a challenge worth the trouble.

From time to time I like to revisit the images I took of Shay, just to feel the way I did when I met her - completely awestruck. She was two and a half feet of glowing light which was about as *far* as she could see and as *much* as she could see. Though blind and unable to speak, Shay has more life and curiosity than Tinkerbell. Sound and texture is everything in her world which became clear to me as I towered over her with all my gear ready, completely mystified as she hugged and licked the speaker beneath the glowing television, as if it were a vibrating mother of sound and warmth. She followed the gentle, familiar voice of her foster dad as he walked about the house. But, once outside, she was fearless. As soon as her little feet landed in the grass, she took off running - I was horrified. How did she know what was ahead of her? And, what were they thinking leaving me the primary care giver of this precious, fragile egg in this pinball machine of a suburban backyard for even one millisecond? I was so busy chasing her around the backyard with all my gear to even consider light, composition, etc. But, once Shay

discovered the white fence that safely protected her from the world beyond, she only traveled anxiously post by post by post, looking for where the gate broke and she could run even farther and faster than before. I was so afraid she would hurt herself I didn't take a decent shot of her for the first two hours. After awhile, I figured out that by singing to her, she became still and almost dazed. While the effect certainly



made her easier to photograph, it hardly captured her radically passionate spirit. Not until her therapist arrived and was able to keep Shay safely occupied could I capture her as I saw her. A perfectly adapted little soul who created her own world by completely different laws and who was braver at two years-old than I've ever ventured to be. She was adopted just last month to a loving home. I hope they have a big backyard.

David was another challenging shoot. His medical condition kept him bed-ridden and confined to a hospital room. Severely delayed and without his vision, David only showed an emotional response to the familiar voices of his most cherished nurses. I was told that the primary goal for David was to find someone willing to come visit him at his current facility. Someone to read to him, to bring him clothes, and to provide a little extra comfort. With the help of the staff I rigged some lighting and spent a few hours trying to capture his glowing but quick responses to the coaxing nurses. All the while trying to force the questions any newcomer to this scene would intrinsically ponder: *What happened to this child? Who did this to him? What can we realistically expect from this image?* His final portrait was viewed on the Heart Gallery website by a nurse in Ohio, who decided to adopt David and bring him home as her new son.

Tiffany's shot was a stolen moment, a gift really given to me by my fellow photographer who was actually being electrocuted (low voltage, though really painful looking) via my metal reflector bounce pad by an overhead power line. This accident made Tiffany, for the first time in two days, laugh hysterically. I should have stopped shooting to help him, but he recovered, and sometimes the smiles are hard to come by.

Then there was Joshua. He's handsome and knows it. His formal portrait, although nice, showed him to be almost 10 years older than he really was and, with the chances of being adopted cut in half by the time a child turns 8, we opted to reshoot. But, I got terribly lost trying to find the place and by the time I finally arrived there was only one good hour of shooting light left in the day. As it turned out, Joshua wasn't all that excited to get his picture

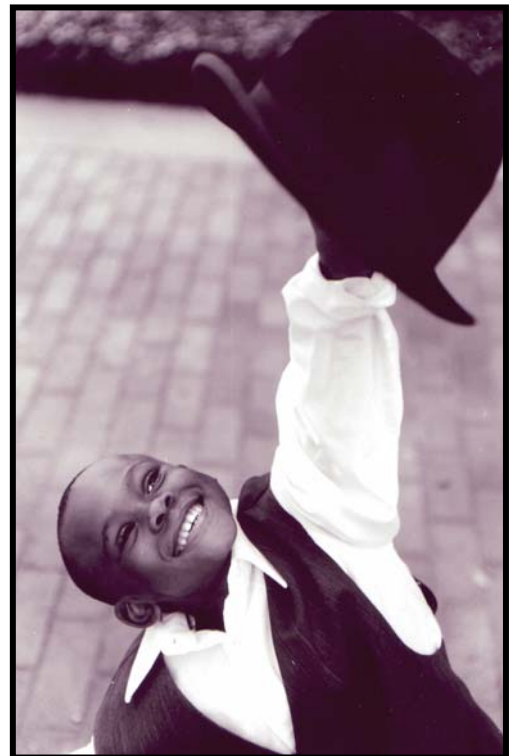


taken again (or talk, engage, make eye contact, etc.) But, after a while, he agreed to shoot some hoops in the backyard. We seemed to strike a kind of courtside deal as he started to slowly warm up to me. If I could prove myself athletically, he would let me photograph him. To his amazement-and my own-I sunk several in a row. Finally, with twenty minutes of light left, I precariously arranged myself beneath the hoop and fired off my shutter as he slam-dunked over my head.

Michelle was a cutter and “goth” kid with a tough

exterior and, as much as she tried to hide it, a cherubous freckly face. I’ll always remember her at the Heart Gallery opening reception one year and my regrettable decision to allow her to film the program. Instead of documenting an hour of coveted speakers, she mostly filmed my little “goth” brother, with whom she’d built a crush on in a matter of moments. I took her Heart Gallery photograph during a precious day at the beach with one of my favorite care managers. (She doesn’t have a social life except for these kids, because when you do your job well, that’s all you have time for.) Over time you become close with the social workers. Just like photographers, you’ll have some that go the extra mile, and you’ll have others that you have to drag to the shoot to make it happen. Michelle was matched with the perfect family who had an abundance of patience and money and love. She ran away. But, I still have hope that Michelle will one day learn to love herself as much as she is loved by everyone around her.

At the Heart Gallery, we *never* say never, and there’s no such thing as *unadoptable*. Two days before his 18th birthday. A set of six siblings. An infant with a life-threatening heart condition. Miracles happen because these kids are *advocating for themselves*. Their hopeful faces look into your soul and ask you directly, ‘Why *not* me?’ Who can walk by these faces untouched, knowing these beautiful children only ask for the one basic need most of us were born with, free of care and worry of it: a dad to tuck her in and read her to sleep, a mom to videotape his music recital and a family to make his birthdays special? Unless you are completely stone-hearted these kids jump off the walls out of their frames, pull at your heart and inspire you to call your mother out of the blue. I’ve actually seen grown men break down and cry in front of this gallery. People who have never



once considered adoption see a picture of a parentless child while innocently shopping on a Saturday afternoon, and the next thing you know, it's all they can think about.

Being a Heart Gallery photographer sometimes brings me closer to these kids than I am, admittedly, comfortable. There are kids you fall in love with in 30 minutes, who follow you out to your car, help you load up your equipment and look down at their feet as they say, "You know, I'm a really good kid. So, if you know of any nice people like yourself, will you please tell them I'm here, that I'm a good kid? If they adopted me I won't cause any trouble."

And it breaks your heart, which you pack up in little pieces with your camera gear and head off in your car, trying not to sneak a peek at your proofs as you drive home. Sometimes, when you drive off like in the movies, you see this kid there in your review mirror watching you leave, and you promise yourself you'll always keep in touch.

With these kids you want to sidestep the hard questions and pretend they don't know what kind of predicament they are in. They seem to sense the grown-up reality that try as we might, some still fall through the cracks and won't be adopted- and it could be them. They aren't kittens anymore. Certainly, it's not the same for every child. Almost at random, it seems, one child can be in the care of dedicated, loving and demonstrative social workers, foster parents, therapists, etc. And some are, for all intents and purposes, on their own.

At one Heart Gallery event, a hopeful parent asked me which of these kids were, you know- "normal". I had to smooth down my skirt and adjust my PR cap to answer politely, that all of these kids are normal for what they're going through right now. (Which at the very least is the issue of being abandoned as a defenseless child by the person you trusted most in the world.) But, I could tell she translated my comment into, 'I know what you are asking, but I'm not telling' and she walked away.



Kids aren't really that normal. They can laugh so hard soda expectorates from their nose and then cry with big, fat, real tears all in the same 30 seconds. They are innocent and they are learning from us all whether we realize it or not. Who am I to say what child is normal? I only see their potential to one day be fully realized independent, loving and secure human beings who will look at their past in the foster care system as sort of an unjust trial they've overcome and made them stronger, more compassionate. I've met some of these heroic adults, work with them and am mentored by them, so I *know* it can be done.

Mostly, these kids are just like every other kid you know. They're little kids looking for love and attention. Troubled teens making their way through perilous popularity contests, hormones, and, oh yeah, the foster care system. They have good days and bad days.

As a Heart Gallery photographer you never know what you're going to get. In time you learn that you have to respect their emotional space. It's not all smiles all the time. You might arrive on set to learn that the child you're photographing today was just pulled from his beloved foster family of three years yesterday. Or you've been assigned to photograph a child who was photographed the year before but not adopted, and you have to convince them to try again. Just as easily, you can show up for the shoot and find a kid bouncing off the walls with energy, excitedly proclaiming that he's ready for his close-up. Even better, he's now explaining that he wants to be an actor when he grows up while he changes costumes. This was the case with Brian, who was adopted six months later by a big, loving family with lots of character.

Joshua, Tiffany, and Imani are still waiting to find a family.

Though the ultimate goal for these kids getting their photos taken is to be adopted, many of them are setting themselves up for the possibility of rejection. After each photo shoot I am overwhelmed by their bravery, especially the older teenagers who boldly put themselves out there, searching for the one thing that most kids their age never have to question: the security of knowing that they are the most important person in the world- to another person.

Their prize of being a Heart Gallery photographer is, quite literally, just being involved in the chaotic and rewarding process.

One day, when the Florida laws change, I'll adopt from our county. (My bad luck to reside in one of the only two states where it's still illegal for gays to adopt.) Personally, and this is written from the heart, the fact that politicians are keeping children languishing in the foster care system instead of in loving homes that want them is a crime. But, thinking that the child who I may one day call my own is walking around, maybe even having their image captured by another Heart Gallery photographer, inspires me to keep going, to keep uniting families, to keep capturing hope.

(Heart Gallery Photographs, Top to bottom: *Shay* – 2007, *Imani* – 2008, *Savannah* – 2008, *Joshua* – 2008, *Shay* – 2007, *Michelle* – 2007, *Brian* – 2006, *Tiffany* – 2007)

Tips for Heart Gallery Photographers

Bad ideas.

Six siblings piled into the back row of a trolley car, with the conductor stopping every minute to yell at us to stay in our seats and the tourist glancing back disapprovingly at our obvious lack of control of the situation. The pictures were blurry and I lost two lens caps somewhere near downtown.

Handing over your most expensive camera to an energetic child who just wants to hold it- just for a minute.

Blue popsicles as a pre-shoot treat.

Good ideas.

Do your homework.

Ask the child's foster parents and care managers about the child's likes, hobbies, general disposition. Gently inquire about any special needs that might help you be more prepared. Ask about wardrobe, see what they like to wear and what they have to wear.

Consider location carefully.

If possible, choose a location the child is familiar with, but is outside of the house. A playground or beach provides a safe atmosphere where the child can move about freely. If you find out your child loves to dance, consider asking a local dance studio if you can shoot there. If they love nature, maybe an afternoon at the aquarium would be fun. If the child is unable to leave their bed, room or house for medical reasons, clear as much clutter out of the way and bring things that might entertain them there, like bubbles or some child-friendly instruments. Props aren't always necessary and can sometimes be distracting- but sure come in handy if you happen to be photographing a hyper-active child or a child on a less than inspired day.

Costume pieces, toys, musical instruments, umbrellas, hats, crafts, even a cardboard box can be great fun to play with. Be sure to define what items are gifts for the child and what things you just brought to play with so there's no confusion. Have portable lights at all times, a bounce, a backdrop and sheets for sitting on.

Photograph siblings together.

Find out if the child you're assigned to has siblings and if the goal is for them to be adopted together. No matter how hard it is to orchestrate, it's a magical moment on and off camera when separated siblings get an extra visit together. If they are to be adopted together, they should be photographed together.

Bring extra clothes.

Some agencies may provide photographers a small reimbursement for buying clothes for the children. Always, always bring an extra shirt or two. Some kids insist on basketball jerseys and jeans. Others like to get dressed up. Either way is fine, but clothes should fit, be clean, logo free so as not distract from the image. Sounds basic, but I have a stack of reshoots that were required due to this issue.

Invest your time.

Photographs taken where either the care giver or the photographer only dedicated 20 minutes or less, shows. Allow for time needed to get to know the child, or if the child's not particularly excited about having their picture taken- give the patience and take the time to disarm them before putting a big camera in their face. Many of the children live in homes outside of county

lines, so consider driving time, light and their nap or eating schedules when planning out your shoot.

Everyone loves gifts.

Nothing fancy, but a little souvenir is always welcomed. My photographer friend Dan always brings photos that he took in Africa of lions and zebras to give to the kids. They think he's famous and it gets to his big head.

Be a professional, be a kid.

It can be tough showing up at one of these shoots not knowing if the child's going to be sad, serious, unwilling. When in doubt, just be goofy and play with them. Once, I came and left without taking a single shot. But, now that we were buddies and I, too, could yodel and catch a lizard, he'd let his guard down. The next time I'd fare much better. Some kids want to be adopted, but don't want to have their picture taken. Try not to make the focus of the shoot about being adopted, keep it light and fun. Gently coax out of them their proudest self without asking them to smile or pose. Let them take silly pictures of you. But, if none of that works, remember that thoughtful, introverted and even sad expressions get just as many calls from potential moms and dad as a smiling, hopeful face.

Bring a friend.

Inquire about needed background checks or approvals to bring an assistant or friend with you. Preferably bring one that loves kids and can easily engage them, leaving you free from time to time to shoot with candor and the child to be distracted and themselves.

Eye on the prize.

Photography IS art, just in case anyone is still wondering. But, don't forget the goal here is adoption. Be aware of poses or clothing that may seem provocative and steer clear. What flies for an artsy shoot of your kid naked in the swimming pool won't fly for kids in care. Put any artistic ego aside and give the agency several of your best shots so they can choose one that reflects the child they know best. When selecting images to use in the gallery, there are many issues adoption specialists must consider that you may not be aware of, so help make their jobs easier. Though your role as the artist is critical to the success of the project, the kids ALWAYS come first.

Protect yourself.

No matter how trusting a foster parent may be or how busy a care manager, never allow yourself to be alone with a foster child. (The exception to this is if you are background checked and approved for mentoring, which I highly recommend!) Always insist the photo shoot is supervised by a guardian, care manager or foster parent. Besides, the more people present who know the child, the better the energy for the shoot. I encourage public locations, out of the foster home for this reason. If they must transport a child to a location shoot, they will be there to help supervise and engage the child, too.

Always have wipes.

For you and for the kids. The reasons are too many to list. Just trust me.



By Daniel Weisberg

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To find out if there is a Heart Gallery in your part of the country, log on to www.HeartGalleryofAmerica.org. If there's not, consider getting some of your photographer buddies together and start one. Contact JMiller@childrensboard.org for a start-up kit or peruse the many available resources on the national website.

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