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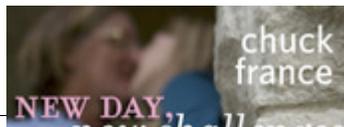


### New Day, New Challenges

By Sarah Coleman

Being a freelance photojournalist can sometimes feel a bit like being a secret agent. Ask Kansas-based photographer Chuck France, who often finds himself in a number of locations in a single day, adapting his identity to fit in with the situation. Take today, for example. "I'm going to shoot a labor secretary in Kansas City for a university publication, then tonight I'll put on my acid-washed jeans and shoot Def Leppard and Poison for the *Kansas City Star*," he says.

Other days might find France covering a story at one of Kansas's two big military



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bases, Fort Leavenworth and Fort Riley, or hunkering down to capture Nascar drivers rounding a corner at the Kansas Speedway. Once in a while, too, he'll be called on to shoot a portrait of a local celebrity, like record producer and rapper DJ Miles Bonny.



It's all a far cry from what France was doing before 2002, when he worked, variously, as a museum curator, a grant writer and an IT entrepreneur. "I'd wanted to be behind the lens of a camera since I was thirteen, but I didn't have the courage to do it," he says. "Then I hit thirty-five, and thought, I don't want to get to the end of my life and say that I never followed my passion."

To get his freelance career off the ground, France approached an editor at his home town newspaper, the *Baldwin City Signal*, and asked if there was an event he could shoot. "It's a very small paper, so it's not as though he had a lot of staff photographers to draw on," France says. The editor sent him to cover a few events—including the town's annual Blues & Barbecue festival—and France also used his own initiative. "There was a fire in town, so I went along and shot an image of a busted fire hydrant pouring out water, with firefighters working to subdue the blaze in the background. The editor really liked that image."

Soon after the firefighter image was published, France got a call from the local college, Baker University, asking if he could shoot for them part-time. Confident that he must be doing something right, he started calling photo editors at larger papers, like the *Kansas City Star*, the *Topeka Capital Journal* and the *Pitch* (Kansas City's alternative weekly paper). To his delight, all three editors gave him assignments.

France credits his quick success to various factors, one of which is his ability to zero in on human drama in any story. When shooting a story on wounded veterans at Fort Riley, he lowered his camera to capture a shot of a veteran's sock-clad feet resting on a wheelchair, with the legs of a soldier in military boots next to him. "For me, that image told the story," he says. "It told of the risks soldiers take, and the fact they could be injured or die at any time."

He's also prepared to put his camera in places other photographers might avoid. Early in his career, he was shooting at a small festival in the town of

Leavenworth, trying to capture an image of children bobbing for plastic ducks in a pool. Suddenly, it occurred to him that there was a good way of getting a more quirky, different image. "I took the camera strap off my neck, dunked the camera in the pool and shot the scene from under the water," he remembers. "People thought I was nuts, but the camera was just fine."

Working with Olympus cameras helps France minimize the risks to his equipment. He shoots with the Olympus E-3, and favors the Zuiko 35-100mm lens, which he calls "razor sharp." Thanks to the Olympus body's rugged construction, he doesn't need to worry about dunking the camera into a paddling pool or shooting in the rain. "Being a news photographer, I have to have a camera that will come through for me every time, and the E-3 does," he says. He also loves being a member of the Olympus Global Professional Services program, which provides him with unlimited tech support, expedited repairs and equipment loans. "They're incredibly responsive, and you don't feel like a number when you're in this program," he says.

In 2007, France got a big break when an editor from the Kansas bureau of the Associated Press called him up. The editor had seen an image France shot, of a cowboy father-and-son singing duo, in the *Topeka Capital Journal*, and wanted to license it. "I said sure, why not?" France recalls. "Then the guy said, how come you don't shoot for us? And I said, I don't know, you tell me." The two exchanged a few emails back and forth, and soon France was working for the AP as a stringer.

Though the news business has suffered badly from the double blow of the Internet revolution and the Recession, France says he's bullish about the industry's prospects. "A news event happens somewhere in the world, and anyone can post images on Facebook and Flickr—but I think most people can see a difference between that and true photojournalism," he says. Recently, he's been taking the new Olympus E-P1 to his assignments, recording high-definition video along with his images, because, he says, "editors are increasingly looking to produce multimedia stories."

The fact that everything has fallen into place for him in a relatively short time is reassuring, France says: it tells him that "I'm doing what I need to be doing." He may not know where he's going to be tomorrow, but Chuck France couldn't be happier about that. "With news, you're always going to new places, meeting new people," he says. "It keeps me on my toes, and it's absolutely never, ever boring."

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