

NOVA MONDAY

Family Focus

Famous photographer
inspires son, 10,
to write about Brooklyn

By CELIA MCGEE

TEAMWORK: Giancarlo Roma and father
Thomas outside their Brooklyn home.

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A father-son B'klyn bridge

Photographer
& his boy create
'Show & Tell' book

By CELIA McGEE
DAILY NEWS FEATURE WRITER

Photographer Thomas Roma has worked with some tremendous collaborators. Museum of Modern Art photography authority John Szarkowski first introduced him to a large public there. The scholar and New Yorker writer Henry Louis Gates Jr. did the opening text for "Come Sunday," Roma's book about African-American church life in Brooklyn. Famed Harvard psychologist Robert Coles and Roma founded DoubleTake, the acclaimed magazine devoted to documentary writing and photography.

But Thomas Roma, 51, has a particular soft spot for his latest co-creator: Giancarlo Roma, age 10.

His son was a sharp-eyed 8-year-old when they came up with the idea for "Show & Tell," just out from powerHouse Books. They decided that Roma the younger would choose images of Brooklyn taken by his father since he started photographing in 1973, and then write short, reflective compositions about them. Giancarlo would also design the book's cover.

"We gave ourselves one year," Giancarlo says. It was tough and go. "I finished my last essay on New Year's Eve [2000]."

Giancarlo loves to write, and keeps extensive journals on trips, but he learned that writing succinctly and eloquently for publication isn't always a breeze.

"I had to find ways to help him concentrate and focus," says Thomas. "Sometimes Giancarlo would get blocked on a word, and I would give him hints without actually saying it — it was like a TV game show."

"I also said to him, 'Do you think I was always in the mood to take pictures, or to be in the darkroom? What do you think, that it's easy?'"

EASY, NO, gratifying, yes. Once he entered the field, Thomas quickly won recognition for the intense documentary sensibility he trained on subjects from the public swimming pool in Sunset Park to Brooklyn Criminal Court and elevated subway lines (the series "On Higher Ground"). The recipient of two Guggenheim fellowships, one of which landed him in Sicily for a decade, Roma currently heads Columbia University's photography program.

Willis Hartshorn, director of the International Center of Photography, says the photographer continues to display "an enormous virtuosity. He's a picture maker in the classic sense, since his whole life is a source for his images, and his work a tool of personal observation and communication."

Father and son are sitting in the kitchen of their Park Slope row house. Thomas' wife, Anna, a former financial executive, has just brewed some tea and put out a plate of after-school cookies. Her father is photographic master Les Friedlander, rendering Giancarlo a kind of f-stop royalty.

That isn't Giancarlo's bag, though. A



PICTURE A BOROUGH Thomas Roma shot the photos, including these, and his school-age son, Giancarlo, wrote the text for "Show & Tell," a book depicting Brooklyn through their eyes. In their next project, they will photograph the same subjects.

fifth-grader at a Brooklyn private school, he is a chess prodigy and, as he writes in the comments opposite his father's photograph of three boys playing ball in the street, "Baseball means a lot to me."

Giancarlo is a shortstop for the Brooklyn Bonnies, a club started in the 1930s for disadvantaged youth. He could have joined school friends in Little League but he had long admired the Bonnies at the nearby Parade Grounds. Last year, Giancarlo was MVP on his team. His teammates call him "G Man," and he wants to be the shortstop for the Yankees when he grows up.

His father's Long Island childhood was different. The son of a man he describes as an Italian tough guy "who loved guns," he spent time in and out of juvenile homes, dropped out of high school and started to make his way as a trader at the New York Stock Exchange.

A near-paralyzing car accident in his

early 20s led to a lengthy, painful hospital stay, which he survived only, he feels, thanks to the gift of a camera from his brother. "My recuperation was sitting in a chair by a window taking pictures," he says.

Eventually, he got his mother to drive him to the public library's Mapleton branch in Brooklyn, "where I read every book on photography I could find." He started building his own cameras and making the acquaintance of such leading figures as Friedlander, Walker Evans, Garry Winogrand, Tod Papageorge and William Gedney.

In their work, as in his own, he above all values the genuine — the same quality he pushed for in Giancarlo's writing. "If I even suggested a word, it would have been inauthentic," he says.

The collaborators have their tensions, the kind, as Giancarlo writes in the book, about a backyard scene involving a moth-

er and daughters "that makes me think of parents and children and what's difficult between them."

Says Thomas, "I'm not ashamed to say I have hopes for him and I push him a little. There was conflict. If a week went by and he hadn't written anything, I'd get frustrated."

It won't prevent them from doing another book together. This time, Giancarlo will take up photography, with father and son snapping the same subjects.

They think they understand themselves and each other a little better because of "Show & Tell." "I wanted to show Giancarlo what I'd seen all those years," says Thomas.

Says Giancarlo, "We know a little more about how we look at the world."

In reading over his son's essays as they were written, Thomas noticed one more thing.

"I couldn't," he says, "tell his handwriting from mine."

COVER
STORY