Chatting with Paul Audia

By: Madison Tolley | *I've got ten minutes and $100,000 on the line,* Paul Audia thought, four hundred feet underground, three miles inside of a West Virginia mountain.

In the late 1980s, Paul tried desperately to find a way to shoot the cover of Peabody Energy's annual report on coal mining. Just minutes prior, a floor manager told him that it cost $10,000 dollars a minute to shut down that part of the mine, and that he'd better get his shot in ten minutes or less.

Looking around, he saw what's called a longwall: around 1,000 feet of black coal with ugly green fluorescent lights hanging above. The miner stood behind large machinery in his yellow hard hat, with its glowing yellow light. In that deep, dark cavernous space, everything was black, the dark coal hardly reflecting in the dim green-yellow light. Although he could use the flash from his camera to light the area, Paul knew he was limited by shooting with transparency film. Unlike negative or digital film, if the photos were either over or underexposed, it would be almost impossible to correct.

"Now that's what I call pressure," Paul tells me. "I thought: How can I make this work?"

Holding the camera up to his eye, it shuttered as he took the first shot.

Blurry – the miner moved too much.

The second one was all right.

"The third one was right on," Paul says.

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Paul Audia is a Chicago-based, globe-trotting photographer who has worked as a fashion photographer for various bridal magazines, *W Magazine*, *Vera Wang*, and *National Geographic's* catalogue—just to name a few—over the course of more than four decades. But Paul began his love for photography when he was just seven years old in a little coal mining town in West Virginia, his parents handing him the family camera to take a picture of them. At such a young age, Paul says he harbored feelings of being a photographer, even though he wasn't exactly sure what that meant at the time. His hobby developed even more once he reached high school and began to direct the photographers at sporting events, asking them to try certain angles or shots. "They seemed to really like it," he says. "The photos turned out really nice."

A few years later, he began to work at a radio station where he met someone who also had a knack for photography. For the first time, Paul felt that there was someone with whom he could share his passion. It was then that Paul decided to get serious about photography. While still working at the station, he devoted his spare time to learning and perfecting the craft: "Anytime someone could stand still long enough for me to take a photo of them, I would practice."

It took some time, but eventually Paul quit his job and started his own studio, taking jobs from weddings to family portraits to senior photos. When he decided to leave that small West Virginia town and move to Chicago, he knew he had the experience. He thought it would be easy.

"It wasn't." He chuckles, "I had to start all over again because nobody knew me, nobody knew my name."

As a young writer hoping one day to work in Chicago myself, I ask Paul if he was ever worried he wouldn't succeed. "Yeah. Just about every day," and laughs again.

He's quiet for a minute, then, his voice drops. "You have to have the fear of not succeeding and the confidence of succeeding at the same time." He pauses. "You have to be confident, but if you don't question yourself and what you're doing, I think you think you're cheating yourself and your subject."

Since moving to Chicago, his early days began by taking pictures for bridal magazines, shooting Vera Wang runway shows in New York City, and creating fashion photography around the world for *National Geographic*'s clothing catalogue. While he loves fashion photography, more recently, he has stepped in another direction, delving into the realm of video by directing and producing for Access Community Healthcare Network, which works with underserved people in Chicagoland.

"The pieces that I am really proud of, I've done outside of getting paid. I was photographing bridal gowns in Europe and for whatever reason I asked the model, 'would you mind flipping the dress around backwards?' And she did it. I don't think the designer would ever use it, but it's one of my favorite shots."

After a moment, Paul speaks, his voice like bubbles. "The coolest thing I've photographed to date has got to be this book." He's talking about *Sharing the Wisdom of Time* by Pope Francis and Friends, published by Loyola Press in October of 2018. While he was not the only photographer on the project, he spent about a year travelling across the United States and to ten different countries in Europe. The book focuses on elder wisdom from around the globe, including topics of death, love, and life. Telling the stories of people's lives, the book includes excerpts from a Holocaust survivor, to a former Black Panther member, a woman in Slovenia who was born with cerebral palsy, to 92- year old artist living in Clifden, Ireland.

His process for shooting this book was a little different than what he's done in the past. "The biggest craft is in your mind. In what you're going to do, and how you perceive [your project]. With the book, I was trying to enrich what the editor had written about [someone's] story. Going in, I had a little bit of knowledge of what the story was, but not too much. I didn't want that to taint the way I shot."

So, the first thing he'd do when he arrived on location was to "just sit down and BS with them." He'd talk, joke around, ask to hear the subject's stories. And then he'd get up and start to photograph the subject while he or she was talking. After a while, he'd sit down, and they would talk some more. "[The subjects are] molding you, whether you know it or not. That's something a lot of photographers miss, particularly in this type of genre. I wanted to have them help me with their words, the story of their life, so I could portray that in the book."

Having shot across the world with *National Geographic* and while creating *Sharing the Wisdom of Time*, Paul knows that travelling often influences his photography. Whether it's to Peru, France, California, or West Virginia, he says photographs are tied to particular places. "Even though I don't always fully understand the language of the places I go to, I want to try my best to immerse myself in the culture. In that city. That town. That country. If I could move anywhere outside the U.S. I would go to Tuscany."

"Why?" I ask.

"I love the food. I love the wine. The people are tremendous."

A hundred or so miles from Tuscany, when the book was released in Rome, Paul remembers the president of Loyola Press asking him what image in the book he thought was the best. "I said the best one was one that I didn't take."

The photo he picked is of an older gentleman in a navy suit playing the piano, his fingers draped softly over the keys, eyes closed, a wide smile plastered across his face. Behind him: empty crimson church pews, arched windows letting in golden light. "He had expression."

Paul continues, "I think it surprised her that I didn't say [a photo] of my own. In my mind, this was the best image, and if you can't think that someone else is better than you, then you're not good enough. You can't be afraid that someone else is taking a good photograph, because that's how you learn."

It is not just what he has learned about photography that made the book Paul's most memorable project, but the people as well. "The stories have altered the way I think about life and myself," he says. "The things that people go through, it humbles me, because they don't hold anger. And they are not the type of people who will hold anger. They don't want people to repeat the things that have happened, and I guess that's the big lesson."

One creative person to another, I ask Paul what it means to be an artist and he is silent for a minute. "Part of it is being your own person yet knowing that you still have to please someone to make money. Feed the children. Pay the bills—whatever the case may be."

He's silent again.

Then, he says something that surprises me.

"I don't think everything I photograph is art. Far be it. There are times when it's just a commodity. But being an artist—I like being able to create. To work with people and to tell stories."

I let this sink in.