

Member Showcase: Clayton Reitzel: Humble Humanity in Nicaragua

By Roxy Hastings, IACC Member

On March 12, 2015, Images Alberta Camera Club was treated to two amazing presentations by two outstanding photographers—one a pro, and one an enthusiast, who could easily be a pro.



Clayton Reitzel © David Aldana

Curtis Comeau wowed us with his incredible advertising photography, but concluded with a series of travel images that were clearly dear to his creative heart. Curtis ended by answering his own rhetorical question, 'how could he shoot scenes that had been shot a hundred thousand times and still be unique?' His answer, he always includes people. Because each person is unique, they make each shot unique.

As if right on cue, up stepped our own Clayton Reitzel, who proceeded to entrance us with a short presentation showcasing a slice of lives lived with humble humanity in Nicaragua.

I have to admit that I became so quickly engrossed that I forgot I was supposed to be writing this article and didn't wake up to the fact for about five minutes or so. I even had to write Clayton and ask him for the title of his talk because I had neglected to write it down!

I do remember Clayton saying his passion was photographing people, showing where and how they lived. To this end, he had travelled to Nicaragua on a photo tour run by Darlene Hildebrandt, but the tour was far more than just photography. The participants had to give back to the community that they had the privilege of photographing by helping paint a community centre, teaching, and serving food to an impoverished neighbourhood. Not only was this a fine humanitarian effort, it also helped immerse them into the community, gaining trust and thus making opportunities for powerful photographic works. Who cannot love the concept?

Clayton had also told me that he loves to photograph architecture, which should not be surprising given that he is a professional engineer. This seems to have spilled over into street photography too, although birds and animals are not neglected, and he says he is willing to give just about any genre a go.

Clayton treated us to a presentation that I can only sum up in one word: HAUNTING.

For my write up, Clayton supplied me with images that I think nicely abstract his presentation.

Pretty in Pastels

Clayton started out on an architectural note, giving us a sense of the place where people lived. What struck me right away was just how clean this city was, it looks much cleaner than most North American or European cities that I have seen. I love the soft pastel colours, with their subdued earthy hues. The image has a strong leading line that draws me right through the town square, inviting me to eat up every detail. He even managed to capture a motorcyclist, thus fulfilling the need for people to make a great travel image. Clayton was off to a good start.



© Clayton Reitzel

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Clayton Reitzel (continued)

Reach Up

However, “Reach Up” quickly showed that Clayton was not going to be technically bound, as he showed us that other elements, such as strong angles and dramatic leading lines, can give a travel image punch (even without people). The complementary colours of yellow and blue give the image a classic look that finely supports the traditional architectural style. Great composition.



© Clayton Reitzel

Polaroid

This was such a heartwarming shot. One of the trip participants had what was truly a stroke of genius and brought a Polaroid camera. I didn't know that you could still get film for those puppies! One of my feelings of guilt shooting people on trips is that you can show them images as you take them, but you often cannot give them the image. And I know from experience shooting in remote eastern Turkey that taking pictures with a DSLR can attract a lot of attention. What a great concept to be able to take pictures of kids, give them the picture and then have the image develop before their eyes. Totally magical! And here you can see that the spell worked. I love how the boy is looking at the girl's picture, strongly connecting the two characters. A lovely bokeh lifts the kids from their background. Careful, those smiles are contagious!



© Clayton Reitzel



© Clayton Reitzel

Priceless Smile

Is this an OXFAM or UNESCO worthy image or what? Seriously, this shot deserves some high level publication. Clayton told us that one of the things that struck him about Nicaragua was how happy the people were, despite their often impoverished condition. To make good on his claim, he served up his favourite image and I can see why – it's the type of image that can't help but make you smile. You can sense the poverty, but her hope and happiness is just bursting forth – and if you don't feel it then you're probably not breathing either! Technically gorgeous, with a sharp focus on her big dark eyes which are on a rule-of-thirds line, and then quickly fading out to a soft focus to really make this beautiful child pop from her environment. This needs to be somebody's poster child.

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© Clayton Reitzel

Steam

Steam could be just be two big steaming pots of soup on the stove, if it were not for the inclusion of someone's hand stirring the pot. This is a cunning example of using Curtis Comeau's concept of putting people into the picture. It turns a mundane moment into something universally human. The fact that you cannot see who is stirring the pot means that it could be anyone stirring the pot, even you. It gives this shot a universal appeal.

On top of that, we know that this was a soup kitchen, run by a local restaurant, and that Clayton and his fellow travellers were serving the soup that day, under trying conditions. (Not everyone could be fed.)

Green Child

I can see why Priceless Smile (page 7) would be Clayton's favourite image; who could not feel good about life just to look at her? However, my favourite image is one that I honestly could not stand to have hanging in my house, although I can recall few photos that I have seen in any gallery, anywhere, that deliver such a visceral hit. I could not stand to have Green Child in my house because it chokes me up and brings a mist to my eyes whenever I see it. It just tears me up, but like a moth to a flame, I am inescapably drawn to it. Indeed, it is hard to objectively write about it. This hungry little girl waiting in line, staring upwards as if into the heavens, praying that she will be fed with such a look of anguish and faint hope on her face. I can almost hear her raspy whisper, "Please, I'm so hungry. Please feed me." Tenderly embraced by an older brother, one hand hugging her shoulder, the other gently clutching her forearm, his lips slightly parted as if to calmly reassure her, "It's ok, little sister, I know we'll make it, we'll be fed." Or maybe he's just softly singing to comfort her. Either way, his calm demeanor is a beautiful foil to her evident anguish; as if he's trying to play the man, and he's doing a damn fine job of it too. This picture was also a great foil to Clayton's entire presentation and was so singularly strong that it totally balanced all the other beautiful images of happy and joyful children that he had managed to capture.



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