

The Opinion Pages

Op-Talk

Opinions From All Over

# When Struggling Families Spark Internet Rage

By Anna Altman July 21, 2014 6:24 pm

Brenda Ann Kenneally is a documentary photographer who works in depressed urban environments, often photographing their residents repeatedly over a period of many years. “Upstate Girls,” her most recent project, began in 2003 when Ms. Kenneally met a teenager named Kayla in Troy, N.Y. Kayla was fourteen and pregnant and asked Ms. Kenneally if she wanted to photograph her child’s delivery.

Ms. Kenneally said yes. She then spent the next ten years taking pictures of Kayla, her children, her lovers, and the loose network of family that connected them. “If there is any art in the images that I have been making in Troy, New York over the past ten years it is that they have heart,” Ms. Kenneally wrote in a grant application to fund “Upstate Girls.” “The undeniable need for this heart forces us all into a shared emotional narrative and that is the place where I want my work to live.”

Last week, Slate’s Jordan G. Teicher featured nine of the photographs from “Upstate Girls” in a post initially titled “Life Below the Poverty Line, Troy, N.Y.” In one, a child holds out a bottle to be filled with coffee; in another, an overweight boy lies shirtless on a bare mattress, the bedside table beside him stacked with Doritos, an empty soda bottle, and a pile of white bread. Several photos show Kayla and other teenage parents holding small children – a father and his infant son are pictured in a cramped and messy bedroom, and a mother cradles the newborn she’ll soon give up for adoption. Kids amuse themselves with video games and knives and pretend to smoke the cigarettes their parents crave.

Ms. Kenneally’s forceful images drew a lot of attention. More than eighteen thousand people shared the Slate article on Facebook and hundreds commented on Slate’s Facebook page. Another 387 commented on the original post. Tweets criticized the subjects and the photographer.

The comments were harsh. Many expressed outrage that Kayla would smoke while holding her baby. (This photograph, singled out with especially virulent criticism, has since been taken down at Ms. Kenneally’s request.) Others remarked that poor people couldn’t afford to waste their money on cigarettes, that the houses pictured were filthy and the occupants slovenly, and that the food visible in some shots was unhealthy. Commenters wondered how poor families had money to

buy their children video games. There were accusations about welfare checks and snide remarks about contraception.

Some accused Ms. Kenneally of exploiting her subjects. “Is the photographer implying that poor people are too stupid to make intelligent choices?” asked one commenter.

Others defended Ms. Kenneally and her subjects. “Have you no sense of anything but resentment and jealousy? Troy has created/allowed a culture of deprivation to fester. Troy is a part of the USA. Have a little charity in your thinking if not in your comments,” one reader wrote. Other commenters pointed to the insidious power of addiction. Some were turned off by the judgmental comments: “If your takeaway from this is the smoking, you’re part of the problem. Middle class white people never cease to amaze me with their monumental ignorance,” read one comment.

Slate’s editor-in-chief, Julia Turner, told Op-Talk that some of the harshest backlash took the publication by surprise: “Commenters had varied responses to the piece. Some felt, as our photo blog editors did, that the photographs offered a compelling portrait of life in straitened circumstances. Others posted ad hominem comments about some of Kenneally’s subjects. That was something we didn’t anticipate.”

Ms. Kenneally told Op-Talk that she was devastated by the response. After the Slate article’s publication, she said, she was soon fielding calls from Kayla and others. She was concerned for her subjects: young, vulnerable people who were reading comments on Facebook calling them “trash.” She added that social media had changed these subjects’ lives: “These guys live on Facebook like they used to live on their front porch.”

Ms. Kenneally has long thought about how to protect those she photographs from judgment and derision. She calls herself a “digital folk artist,” a kind of “hoarder” who collects historical material and ephemera, including letters sent to and from prison, police records, birth certificates and family snapshots. She invites each of her subjects to make a scrapbook and posts videos of them narrating their own lives. To provide context, she likes to present her photographs in triptychs that contrast today’s Troy with historical images of the city, once prosperous thanks to strong iron and textile industries. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, women worked in factories and were comparatively well off. By 2009, Troy’s median per capita income hovered just above twenty thousand dollars a year.

Ms. Kenneally’s work points to the trauma of that socioeconomic shift and what she describes as a new culture that has sprung up in its wake. Many of her subjects have grown up while their parents have been incarcerated. Her photographs show evidence of the country’s obesity epidemic. The children she has photographed often have trouble cooperating at school. Some have experienced frequent suspensions, been diagnosed with behavioral problems and treated with antipsychotics and antidepressants. Often these children, like many others in Troy, end up in juvenile detention.

In its finished form, “Upstate Girls” will provide this context. Ms. Kenneally plans to exhibit the work at the North-Central Troy Historical Society, a facility she’s working to open in a foreclosed house across the street from Kayla’s home. A historical timeline will run along the walls. Ms. Kenneally will also publish five books of her photographs, each printed on newsprint so it is affordable. A digital database will accompany a video documentary by Ms. Kenneally and track the use of particular words – “case worker,” “parole,” “A.D.H.D.” – to demonstrate the prevalence of certain vocabulary in that community.

Ms. Kenneally has shared her work on the Internet before – on the Times’ Lens blog, on Time’s Lightbox, in the Virginia Quarterly Review and as part of a multimedia poetry project for Studio360. (She has also exhibited the work at the Sanctuary for Independent Media, located in Troy.) The online publications drew conflicted comments – one Studio360 commenter wrote, “I’m deeply ambivalent about this video/poem. I love that it allows me to look, uninhibitedly, at people whose eye contact I avoid in real life. But I’m not sure that indulging myself in condescension and curiosity is particularly helpful” – but the response was by and large more thoughtful than what followed the Slate article. Some comments on the Lens blog expressed compassion for the “bleak lives” Ms. Kenneally’s subjects were born into and suggested volunteering at after-school programs. (A commenter at Time, however, referred to the subjects as “human garbage.”)

The problem with the photographs posted on Slate, Ms. Kenneally argued, was that they lacked context. Worst of all, according to her, was that the Slate headline emphasized the “P word” – “poverty.” “When you put a photograph of a young girl doing something and then say the reason is poverty, viewers separate themselves,” Ms. Kenneally said. She added that the word “poverty” introduces a moralizing element. “The whole purpose of the project is to find a new way to talk about these social issues,” she explained. Without context, Ms. Kenneally said, viewers were cut off from the culture and circumstances that define her subjects’ lives.

Ms. Kenneally contacted Mr. Teicher and Ms. Turner about her misgivings. Slate added some links to more information about the work and changed the headline. It now reads, “A New Way to Talk About Poverty in Troy, N.Y.” Ms. Turner told Op-Talk, “When the work is portraiture, we strive to be particularly respectful of the relationship the photographer has cultivated with his or her subjects.”

Ms. Kenneally said she regretted handing over so much control to Slate: “It was a mistake. Next time I would say which photos could be used and how.” She liked Mr. Teicher’s text and said it was the “sound-bite culture” of the Internet that triggered the backlash. She also expressed hope that the North-Central Troy Historical Society would encourage greater reflection. Most importantly, she said, it would weave Kayla and her community into the historical record: “I want it to be like, we’re here, we exist.”