

AUSPL PEOPLE

Bartay: A Compassionate Photographer in Hot Zones Worldwide



Bartay grew up in the outskirts of Fresno, California, where fig orchards dominated the landscape. It is a far cry from the locales where he would one day find himself as a humanitarian photographer, whose photographs would tell the story of people living in the most remote corners of the world.

A passion for travel and visual storytelling began early. At age 14, Bartay traveled around the U.S. At 19, he took a three-month trip around the world with his sister Jill. Bartay says that, in a high school philosophy class, he wrote a paper on existentialism and decided he wanted to “do it with photographs.” “One thing led to another, and I decided I wanted to do advertising on a national level,” said Bartay. Soon enough he would use his talent for photography and design in the corporate world.

The Early Years: Graphic Design and Advertising

Bartay graduated with a BA from the Santa Barbara, California, Brooks Institute of Photography with honors in 1976. “Two weeks after graduating, I moved to New York, with the intention of staying three years –that’s a long time –but it ended up being over 10 years,” said Bartay, who launched his photography business in the Big Apple. “I had a full floor loft in a building in lower Manhattan, around the corner from the Empire State Building. Business was good. I loved it,” he said. “In the beginning I was doing a lot of advertising, editorial, and corporate photography. I had always been interested in design, but my passion was photography.”

“I left New York for the San Francisco Bay area, but there really wasn’t a lot of work available for the kind of work I did,” Bartay told us. “There wasn’t much advertising going on. I picked up some publishing clients, and I began designing college textbook covers. Photography began picking up, but I decided I wanted to start traveling again.”

Helen Keller International (HKI)

In 2009, Bartay accompanied the Hellen Keller Institute to Nepal as part of a project to document the organization’s endeavors to eliminate malnourishment. “That’s when I got inspired with NGOs and aid organizations,” said Bartay. In Nepal Bartay realized just how powerful his use of visual imagery could be to assist the organizations in their efforts to improve the lives of impoverished people worldwide. Bartay has been working with Helen Keller Institute and other international humanitarian groups for the past seven years.

Danger Ahead: “Ignorance is Bliss”

Bartay’s compassion and respect for different people and their cultures has taken him to some exotic – and perilous – places. He was in Nigeria in 2014, just one week after Boko Haram kidnapped 300 schoolgirls. Later, he arrived in Nairobi, Kenya, the afternoon of the downtown market bombing that killed three people.

Bartay moved to Cambodia in 2012, traveling throughout the country on a motorcycle. He has worked in Thailand, Laos, West and East Africa, Mali, Nigeria and Kenya, mostly fulfilling NGO contracts. He has also worked in Southeast Asia and Vietnam where it wasn't as dangerous, he said.

"I'm not a conflict photographer, so I'm not going to be going to Syria," said Bartay. "I went back to New York two months after 9/11. I don't want to stay away from New York. I don't want to stay away from Kenya because Al-Shabaab is there. I don't want to stay away from Malaysia because they are having problems there. They are having problems everywhere. But, everywhere I've been, the people are fabulous."

"A lot of times I look at it as – ignorance is bliss," laughed Bartay. "I don't go where the terrorists go. They don't want to stay where I stay." Bartay describes life under primitive housing conditions, consisting of a room with concrete walls, floors and ceiling. Even though there was no running water, Bartay had a Western style toilet and a primitive shower, which was essentially a pipe sticking out of a wall. "There were a bed and a window without screens – to keep out mosquitos," he added. Outside the walled compound, people were out front with guns. But "you get used to it," Bartay said. Bartay describes more harrowing experiences, including being in Mali during an Ebola breakout and a near-miss when two bombings occurred in an area where he would have been, had fate not intervened.

Dinuba, California Post Office & AUSPL

Back in California, Bartay handles post office business at the family-owned Dinuba post office, which is in the valley one hour south of Fresno. His father bought the post office in 1964, five years after it was built. Bartay has been involved with the post office since high school. He and his sister Jill are now co-owners, due to the passing of their parents.

"Dinuba is a farming community with a population of about 22,000," said Bartay. "We have a lot of rural routes, but I've never been worried about them closing us." Last summer Bartay renovated the parking lot, and he plans to paint next year. Together Bartay and Jill share responsibility for the building. Bartay can conduct most business by email and Jill is nearby when Bartay is traveling or during emergencies.

The family has long enjoyed membership in AUSPL. "We've always been with AUSPL. We have the insurance, because it's good insurance," said Bartay. "AUSPL has helped me greatly for years. The comps are unbelievably helpful, which are available online now." According to Bartay, information received through AUSPL made his negotiations with CBRE much easier.

It's quiet now but the ever-adventurous photographer is busy planning another trip from his home in San Francisco. "I get a little antsy and restless," he said.