

RAHUL PRASAD: That was Adrienne Watson.

Our sixth speaker today is Dee Dwyer. Dee is a professional photographer who's been anointed "The Visual Voice for the People" by her community. Her images have been published in Vogue, The New York Times, NPR, Vanity Fair, and more. In her talk, Dee speaks on the ways in which the media is used and portrayed throughout society. She will discuss some of her own experiences as a DC-based photojournalist and will initiate a conversation about how we can utilize the media as a tool in creating and uplifting ourselves and our communities. Here is Dee Dwyer.

'HUMANITY AT THE FOREFRONT OF PHOTOJOURNALISM' – DEE DWYER

DEE DWYER: When you hear that one word, what comes to mind?

For me, feelings of compassion, empathy, understanding and respect surface.

In today's society putting Humanity first can be a huge sacrifice. In most businesses unfortunately, it's considered to be going against the norm. Some may categorize you as being a weak link within the company. Most industries will show you that "Business" means money comes first, everything else is last".

Living In a clout driven society where people thrive off of accolades such as likes, comments and awards we often forget to humanize people.

My name is Dee Dwyer, I'm a Photojournalist who produces awe-inspiring photographs of people in my community, celebrities, politicians and everyday life. As a photojournalist, I am also entwined in the complex web of media.

Media and people are often divided. We're expected to only report on what we see and hear and to not interfere with what's happening.

"It is not uncommon for journalism Professors to program their students to never stop photographing." They'll say things like "Do whatever it takes to get your image". An image holds power, and the Photographer is the controller of it.

Media is made by the hands of people just like you and me. And yet, it too often is built on the bones of humanity, rather than being humanity itself.

All of 2020 I've been on the frontlines of the pandemic and protests for Black Liberation sacrificing my safety, life and health to document history. As you can imagine I've witnessed a lot of trauma and resistance.

Looking at my raw and compelling images you will see that I unveil the souls of people.

I'm able to gain access to do so by making genuine connections with individuals. That's only obtained through having good morals and good vibes. Aiming to acquire awards is never at the forefront of my mind whenever I raise my camera to visually tell stories. My goal is to clear up misconceptions placed upon the misunderstood and to show the world what it's made of with hopes of sparking some sort of change for a civil society.

In The National Press Photographers Association, a professional society that promotes the highest standards in visual journalism, code of ethics states to "Treat all subjects with respect and dignity. Give special consideration to vulnerable subjects and compassion to victims of crime or tragedy. Intrude on private moments of grief only when the public has an overriding and justifiable need to see. "

I want to take you on a visual tour of whom some consider to be a legendary group in my industry. The Bang Bang Club was a group of white photojournalists well known for documenting South Africa's apartheid in the 1990s. A prominent member of this group, Kevin Carter, was a recipient of a Pulitzer for his famous photo of a malnourished little black girl just moments away from death. Her body is folded in the fetal position, forehead touching the earth... A vulture stands only a short distance away, eyeing her as its prey.

Kevin did not help the girl make it to a local feeding center.

Kevin dedicated years of his life to photographing the torture of Black bodies deeply motivated by the Photojournalist code of conduct... Photojournalist code of conduct that pretty much states to be objective.

If someone is dying, or in need of food... a drink of water even... Kevin was encouraged to not help.

The image of the malnourished girl grew popular and haunted Kevin.

I imagine that the entire witnessing of human torture eventually got the best of him.

You see, shortly after receiving accolades for photographing these dark moments and losing a close friend in the war while he was out documenting, Kevin eventually committed suicide.

In his suicide note he wrote “I am haunted by the vivid memories of killings and corpses and anger and pain . . . of starving or wounded children”.

The Bang Bang Club was encouraged not to interfere with inhumane issues.

The only thing that mattered was to get the photo. Then, you walk away.

Let's call it what it is.... Emotional Detachment.

Kevin Carter and the Bang Bang Club were not the only ones who practiced emotional detachment. We see the disconnect everyday.

Media is often deprived of humanity....

It doesn't have to be.

I'm from Southeast, Washington D.C.

It can be described as the hidden place behind the “White House” and pretty monuments built by the hands of enslaved people. Some of which are my ancestors.

In Southeast D.C., 92% of residents are Black. It's an under-resourced area filled with high crime and poverty.

As a kid, the only time the media popped in to say hello was for breaking news coverages about violence or tragedy.

They'll come in putting on a facade of wanting to tell the story to help bring awareness to the community issues so that we can receive help.

Once the story would air important facts would be missing, names of victims even....misspelled or mispronounced.

I remember times the community would be in an outrage because the media would dig through the crates to find the victim's past mistakes down to a single parking ticket.

“Why the need to state such facts?,” we'd ask.

I'd hear grown folks saying, "How would that help us as a community?"

Whenever we'd have positive events or stories, the media seemed to not have a genuine interest.

They yearned for the drama because it helps with ratings. Afterall, good ratings equals currency.

As a kid, I learned to never talk to the media because they'd reveal to us through actions that they didn't care about us as humans, they only wanted access to our pain.

Eventually, the trust for the media and my Black community became non-existent.

Southeast needed help, that was no secret.

It still does!

Instead of the media humanizing us, we were made portrayed as savages; as vultures.

As a teenager who took public transportation, I'd overhear people from other parts of the city say to one another "Don't go to Southeast." That statement became a city warning amongst people who weren't from "Southeast." They'd say we saw on the news that it's not safe.

This theme of dehumanization followed me from the streets where I grew up, to university life. While studying filmmaking in college, I pitched a story to my white professor for a movie I wanted to create. It was about a family who'd been given asylum in America because of the blood diamond war in Sierra Leone.

I wrote the script depicting my characters as a loving family who despite being faced with struggle, worked hard in life and continued to chase success. My professor said we needed more drama with this family, as if escaping a war wasn't enough. His idea was to have the family members suffer from PTSD, shown in the film through episodes of rage.

When he said the word "Rage" his eyes lit up, he smirked a little, his posture straightened as if he took pride in asking for this Black family to display their pain through rage. I thought; this excitement coming from my white professor at the thought of wanting this family to display anger was sickening.

I explained to him that not everyone who suffers from PTSD acts out in anger. The look of disgust appeared on his face. He requested yet again, that I make these adjustments to my script. He was passive aggressive with his demands. I thought to myself, "I have PTSD from being Black in America."

My experience growing up in Southeast, D.C. hearing gunshots daily, losing friends and family members frequently due to crime, being harassed by the Police, and having under-resourced schools was a war for me. Yet, I don't go around displaying anger.

Why is it that my professor couldn't humanize this black family I asked myself? Why did he push for the narrative of having them be beastly and not classy?

I eventually gave up on the script. The battle was too draining for me to fight. Besides, I was outnumbered by my white classmates who all agreed with my white professor.

That experience was back in 2009. Let's fast forward to the year of 2020. The year of critical change.

Systemic racism was confronted fearlessly worldwide in the middle of a global pandemic after the gruesome murders of Black people such as Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd and many others who'd lost their lives due to racism.

There was no backing down! Black people grew tired of being constantly mistreated, allies of Black people grew tired as well. They all fought side by side to knock down those walls of destruction. In the midst of this movement to end racism, several insured businesses burned, Police cars were set on fire, and people took basic necessities and valuables that they couldn't normally buy because they'd never received their reparations from slavery to purchase them.

White media ran to the drama! Seeing this narrative being constantly run-in news outlets was deja vu from what I experienced in college with my Professor and classmates.

The media all over called protesters, looters, thieves, and criminals yet they continue to call the murderer who took George Floyd's life an "Officer". They didn't care that the root of the Black movement held cries for justice and the simple desire to be treated with humanity". Just like when I was a child, the media once again only showed images and videos of chaos for views.

This one-sidedness of coverage did not go unnoticed by movement leaders, protestors, and allies. There was so much more than the destruction of property. This prompted Black Storytellers to enter the building. (deep pause)

Clearly the majority of white media was missing a valuable piece of the story which puts humanity first.

Watching the news for myself led to a personal turning point in how I told the story of the Black struggle.

I reclaimed my time and strength to tell the stories of Black people exactly how you would see them if you were standing right there next to them.

Not how the common media has conditioned us to expect them.

It felt like it came full circle, I was able to begin to make up for the loss I faced in college. I could tell stories in the full, accurate range of human experiences.

When my turn came in the industry to show the world what it was made of, I was able to respectfully educate viewers through photographs on questions like...

Why were these buildings being burnt?

Why were these statues of white supremacists being toppled?

Why were Police cars being set on fire?

And... Highlight not just the pain, but the strength in protestors.

The answers to these questions were not shown explicitly in most media outlets when flames make a better focal point. The only way to end these media mistakes is to display full transparency in our work as journalists.

As humans, we are all we have. It is up to us to put an end to stereotypes which in some cases has resulted in the deaths, job loss, and discrimination of many. As members of the media it is our responsibility to clear up misinformation by presenting all of the facts and not just the attraction of a story.

All of 2020 the media world screamed for diversity and a change in storytelling. For many years prior, the media has pushed for its Journalists to report what they see and to be objective. To only go by the facts given at that moment even if some were hidden. It is time for the media industry to change its views.

In order to do responsible reorganization we must put HUMANITY first and tell these stories with integrity not just for likes or ratings due to drama. If a subject is in dire need of help, I dream of a media world where we can provide assistance to them.

By putting humanity first you're able to tell the full story, leaving people with a balanced interpretation of what transpired so that they can make informed decisions.

If we put Humanity first when storytelling, perhaps the world will follow.

Afterall, the media is the most powerful thing in the world.

We have the power to change the world.