

World People Project brings Haida Gwaii character to light

By Andrew Hudson
Haida Gwaii Observer

When Robert Wong looks into the camera, his smile shows in the creases by his eyes.

A cobbler who opened his own shop in 1959, Wong wears a striped work apron and rolled sleeves in a portrait photo, his 78-year-old hands resting on a pair of shiny black leather biker boots with copper zippers.

“He says he’s the happiest man in the world,” says Tallulah, the Vancouver-based photojournalist who took that shot, and who recently visited Haida Gwaii to shoot more photos for a series of portraits and interviews called the World People Project.

Wong, who Tallulah met three years ago in Vancouver, will soon be joined by a muralist, a stone-cutter, a poet, an elder and a vintage stylist she met on Haida Gwaii.

Tallulah said there are no set criteria for who she includes.

Sometimes she is drawn by the work a person does, or by their look or, in one case, by the sight of their dog riding in a sidecar dressed like the Red Baron.

“It’s about celebrating so many fascinating people in the fabric of our communities who really don’t get much in the way of recognition,” she said.

“By the end, if I keep working on it for the next 30 or 40 years, it will be a massive amount of wonderful stories that captures a lot of change.”

Some of Tallulah’s Haida Gwaii portraits and interviews will appear in the coming months at worldpeopleproject.com, and she hopes to return soon with more time for one-on-one sessions and a chance to give a slideshow presentation of her work.

“It takes a bit of time, and a bit of trust for people to know what you’re on about,” she said.

Inside Masset’s Copper Beech Guest House on Feb. 28, Tallulah held a small exhibit of photos from another project: Journeys to the Edge.

Working with freelance magazine writer Roberta Staley, Tallulah has contributed images of a world-champion Qu’ran singer and Afghanistan’s women’s boxing team for a magazine feature on gender equality.

In El Salvador, her photos helped tell the story of how cheap, sugary pop drinks are ruining children’s teeth in places without clean tap water — a story that won an award from the Canadian branch of Amnesty International.

On both assignments, the non-profit Journeys to the Edge not only brought an independent take on global issues — a rarer thing in Canada now that cash-strapped print and broadcast media are closing foreign bureaus — but also supported local initiatives.

Proceeds from the Afghanistan feature supported Young Women for Change, a Kabul youth group that in 2011 organized that city’s first public protest against sexual harassment of women and girls.

Journeys to the Edge also runs a scholarship program that helps young reporters from the developing world get training at Canadian journalism schools.

So far, the program has succeeded in having Sebastian Petion, a reporter in Haiti, learn video reporting at Vancouver’s Langara College.

“It’s important to have journalism all over the place,”



Tallulah photo

Local artist Sphenia Jones stands along the Haida Gwaii shore in a portrait for the World People Project.

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- Tallulah



Tallulah photo

Cobbler Robert Wong, “the happiest man in the world.”

said Tallulah, but there is an ethical dilemma to sending reporters out from the luxury of Canada to return with stories from poorer countries.

“We take quite a lot,” she said.

“We hear these tremendously tragic stories and think, ‘We’re going to help,’ and you publish them over here and that’s sort of it.”

Having learned what he needed to become a video journalist in Vancouver, she said Petion is now back reporting full-time and supporting his family in Haiti.

“It changed his life,” she said. “And that can only be to the good of the country. It goes beyond journalism.”



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