

SHOWING HOPE

**ANA PALACIOS AIMS HER
PHOTOJOURNALISM AT
SERVICE TO OTHERS**

BY AMANDA ARNOLD



Ana Palacios

“My nature is rather weak,” says photojournalist Ana Palacios. That’s an unusual thing to hear from someone who seems anything but. “I mean, the first time I ever traveled to a country that was not first-world was when I was 37, so that’s already saying something,” she insists. “I am very paranoid about illnesses—in the water, in the food, in the animals. I get so many shots when I [travel], and they’ll say, ‘You’re already vacci-

nated.’ I have all the vaccinations possible.”

And yet despite her fears of illness and contagion, Palacios has visited and photographed the leper colonies of China and spent extended time in the hospitals of Benin, Africa, capturing images to bring awareness to neglected tropical diseases such as Buruli ulcer. All in the name of something, she says, of being useful. “Even though it’s super sad what I am seeing or witnessing, I get strength from the power of being helpful.”



THE MOMENT WHEN

Palacios' career didn't begin in human rights and it didn't begin in photography. It began in film, in what some might regard as a dream job: working movie production for directors including Ridley Scott and Roman Polanski, rubbing elbows with actors Orlando Bloom, Natalie Portman, and Liam Neeson. But after almost 20 years in motion pictures,

Palacios, who lives in Madrid, felt empty.

"I just felt like 14 hours a day I was doing things that were not very helpful to the world. It was fun and very interesting and I had always wanted to do film," she says. "... But there was a moment when I felt that I wanted to do something for others, something more meaningful than booking hotel rooms or plane tickets for actors or film crew."

So in 2010, between movies, Palacios reconnected with an old love, photography, which she'd studied in journalism school. She began using her camera to document human rights issues, starting in India, China, and Israel, and eventually moving on to Africa, where she now commits most of her time. Her process is straightforward: She researches causes that interest her, finds



Zawia, at the Kabanga Center in Tanzania, which is supported by AIPC Pandora.

BRIGHT LIGHT

"There was this albino girl, Zawia, 12 years old, who was constant inspiration. I followed her all the time while I was in Kabanga Center, a shelter built to protect albinos from attackers. She was a great leader to the rest of the kids. She speaks Swahili, English, and sign language, used in the center as there are also people with visual and auditory functional diversity and psychological problems. Therefore, she could communicate better than others with all the community. She wants to be a teacher. I was there in 2012 and I am still in touch with her."



WHAT DO YOU LOVE ABOUT AFRICA?

"I CANNOT EXPLAIN WHAT DRAWS ME THERE. THE FIRST TIME I GOT THERE—IT WILL SOUND STRANGE—BUT I FELT LIKE I WAS HOME WHEN I LANDED. THAT IS WHY I FEEL MOST ATTRACTED TO IT—THE FEELING OF HOME AND TRANQUILITY WHEN I'M THERE, WHICH IS STRANGE BECAUSE I USUALLY GO TO SAD SITUATIONS. BUT AT THE SAME TIME, IT'S LIKE, I FEEL USEFUL."

IMAGES ON THIS PAGE FROM THE SERIES "THE DESPERATE PLIGHT OF THE TANZANIA ALBINO," TANZANIA, FOR AFRICA DIRECTO AND AIPC PANDORA

FROM THE SERIES "INEQUALITY IS SKIN DEEP," BENIN, FOR ANESVAD



nongovernmental organizations (NGO) dedicated to particular causes, and then reaches out to see if they would benefit from her photographic skills. She offers her services for free, providing photos that can be used in brochures, on websites, and in annual reports. In addition, she submits the images to publications with the aim of garnering additional exposure for the NGOs.

In return, the NGOs give her access to locations and subjects, sometimes providing her room and board (for which she reciprocates with a donation). If an NGO doesn't have lodging to offer, Palacios stays in a nearby hostel or bunks with area religious missionaries—her preference, she says, since they tend to know the territory well, speak the language, and are trusted in the community. "They live like locals," she says.

Connecting with NGOs, reaching out to embassies, arranging travel to remote areas, setting up lodging for one- to three-month stays—all of this proves easy for a woman who spent her prior career making travel



LEFT, RIGHT, AND BELOW, FROM THE SERIES "ART: A TOOL TO CHANGE THE WORLD," UGANDA, FOR IN MOVEMENT: ART FOR A SOCIAL CHANGE. ABOVE, FROM THE SERIES "TRAFFICKED CHILDREN: REHABILITATION & REINTEGRATION," BENIN AND TOGO, FOR MISIONEROS DE LA PAZ, MISIONES SALESIANS, AND SISTERS VEDRUNAS

and delivery arrangements for international films. If she could manage to bring in an elephant for a shoot or move a crew of 1,000 people around the villages of northern Spain, then she can certainly organize a trip to Africa for herself, she says.

GOOD WORKS

Palacios, who works full time as humanitarian photojournalist, has donated her skills to many causes: the pygmy peoples in Burundi, art as a tool for social change in Uganda, neglected tropical diseases in Benin, the rehabilitation of trafficked children in West Africa. The most high profile of her recent work, which she accomplished with the help of the Spanish nonprofit AIPC Pandora, documents the lives of albinos at the Kabanga refuge in Tanzania. It was Palacios' dermatologist who tipped her off.

"This doctor, Pedro Jaen, along with a group of health professionals, goes to Tanzania once or twice a year for the past 10 years

to operate on people with albinism and skin cancer," she says, which is the leading cause of death for people with albinism. In addition to their medical concerns, albinos in Tanzania face extreme social strain and ostracism. "A 'white' child is a stigma for the family," Palacios says. "They are cared for less, given less to eat, and educated less. In some tribes, albino children may be killed at birth, abandoned, or offered for ritual sacrifice. Many people with albinism are named Mavuto—'problem' in the Chewa language of Central Africa. This is just the first of a series of social disadvantages they will encounter in different stages of their lives."

Understandably, Palacios faces a challenge in gaining trust from subjects who are ostracized in their own community. That's why she doesn't embark on a project with camera immediately in hand. "I eat with them and share time with them, do activities with them, help them washing, help them cooking and cleaning vegetables. And then they get to

know me and see that I am not aggressive," she explains. If it's a shelter of about 20 kids, she won't bring in her camera until about day four. If it's a large hospital with patients, nurses, and doctors, she may wait as much as a week. "For the first few days you are a new toy. Everybody is aware that you are there and it is difficult to photograph their day-to-day life. But after a week, they don't care about you anymore, and that is when the most interesting part comes for me: witness their daily life as if I weren't there."

LIVING IT

Living and working in the remote corners of the world brings unique challenges—frequent power outages, abundant mosquitoes, lack of air conditioning, extreme heat. On a recent trip to Togo, for example, the temperature hovered at 95 degrees Fahrenheit, "but the humidity was so incredibly high that you would be sweating 24 hours a day," she says. "My eyes would sweat. I have never sweated



NEED INFO

through my eyelashes before.” The missionary house where she bunked had fans, but power would die, sometimes for several days at a time. These conditions can make the work difficult, Palacio admits, but “coming across the lack of our usual comforts reminds me what is important and what is not. And it allows me to understand their lives better.”

Because power outages are common, Palacios always brings 10 batteries for her camera, estimating that she’ll use one battery a day and that she won’t lose power for more than 10. She doesn’t download unless she’s sure power won’t suddenly flicker out, and she copies her photos daily onto three drives, storing each of them in different places. “I am a hypochondriac even with my equipment,” she says.

LIFTING UP

Although conditions can be difficult and the causes she covers heartbreaking, it’s not Palacios’ intent to tell a sad story. “I try ... to show some hope in my pictures,” she says, “trying to communicate that there is a way out. We are overstimulated by thousands of stunning and really dramatic images every day, so I feel I have to make a difference in the way I show these vulnerable communities.” She’s careful to put her camera away when she senses her subjects feel uncomfortable or that their privacy is being breached, and she’s mature enough to know that she doesn’t want to capture dramatic images merely for the sake of drawing attention. “Maybe it would work better if I showed the drama, but I will never know because I won’t ever do it.”

“I believe it’s easier to empathize with kind images,” she says—images “that will not make us look at the other side but want to know more.” •

ana-palacios.com

NGOS IN THIS ARTICLE

Africa Directo, africadirecto.org

AIPC Pandora, aipc-pandora.org

Anesvad, anesvad.org/en

In Movement: Art for a Social Change,
inmovement.org

Misioneros de la Paz, misionerosdelapaz.com

Misiones Salesianas, salesianmissions.org

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