

Olivia Maillet

Welcome back to Vox Voice. I'm your host, Olivia Maillet, the multimedia editor at Vox Magazine, and in this episode, Valerie Berta, a social activist photographer, will be talking about their nonprofit, the WE Project. The WE Project's mission is to shift narratives around marginalized communities through visual representation and to foster intersectional dialog. Berta, born in France, graduated from the Missouri School of Journalism with an emphasis on photojournalism. However, they think the way photojournalism is taught through a photographer's gaze does not support marginalized communities. With their nonprofit, they collaborate with their subjects to portray how they want to be represented. Berta elaborates on this in the episode. So let's dive in.

Valerie Berta

My name is Valerie Berta. I am originally from France, so that's the accent, although the accent is also because I am deaf and hard of hearing. So it's actually more of that accent, that and a French accent. I have lived in Colombia now for a little more than over ten years. I am a graduate of the Mizzou J-school. I'm a photojournalist. I am a photographer. I work in communications, and I am, I try to be active locally on issues of social justice and equity.

Olivia Maillet

How old were you when you left France?

Valerie Berta

So it's been kind of a long, winding road. The first time I left, so I left and I came back, and I left and I came back, and I went and I lived in a lot of different places. I lived in China. I lived briefly in South America. I traveled and lived in almost all 50 states except Alaska, Wyoming and the Dakotas. But when I settled permanently, it was after the new school. So I came. The first time I came was way back in the eighties and then when I stayed permanently. So this is my home now. I am a naturalized American citizen. This was what, in the early 2000s.

Olivia Maillet

Was there someone or something that inspired your social activism?

Valerie Berta

Yes and no. I mean, as you know, we all are on the shoulders of everybody who's worked on anything before us, right. And our communities and our family and our ancestors. My role was, again, very winding, very, you know, here and there. But working on social justice issues was something that I started way back when I was here as a grad student

at the J-school. I was on assignment one day as a photography photojournalism student, and I was at Wall Street Park and I was taking pictures. I don't remember the assignment. What I do remember is that lots of kids just flocked over me. Of course, they wanted to pick up the camera and take a picture, and I started devising and organizing a photo workshop that was modeled after one that was going on at the time. And again, this was more than 20 years ago. So that photo workshop was out of DC to just give that to that amazing tool that is a camera in the hands of as many people as possible, and specifically, people who may not historically systemically have the access to that tool. And so in that case, underrepresented kids in the community.

And so I started the voice photo workshop with the help of volunteers, students of my cohort of the J-school graduate and undergrad program at that time, and somebody in the community, Mr. Bill Thompson, who used to work for Parks and Rec. So we had weekly meetings with the kids at the Armory, thanks to Bill, who was my liaison and, you know, facilitator in the community to find the kids, communicate with their family. And what I'm really most proud about from that first foray into actively doing something was that once the workshop was established and I graduated, maybe I think a year and a half later, it went on for a while when I was gone. So people just took it up and went on with it. I don't remember exactly how many years, but it went on for a while, so I'm really, really proud of that.

Olivia Maillet

That's a legacy that you love.

Valerie Berta

Thank you. And it's all it is. So when I came back here ten years ago, I started thinking, okay, I'm back in Columbia. How about I restart the workshop? So I did that. And that was right before when I finally got everything going, because as you know, it's kind of a kind of a lift as far as organization and planning. I got to go in again and then COVID happened. So it's still in the works to be back on. It's something that I'm always thinking about, okay, I need to find the time to organize that again because I think it's really just as needed as it was back then, if not more. And I even have big dreams of making it more than a photo workshop. Maybe just like a journalism workshop, right. Because you know as well as I do that journalism is really kind of in a crisis and we need people to get into this profession for the right reasons, of course, and to bring so many more diverse voices to it.

Olivia Maillet

I would love to see something like that. And then besides this photo workshop that you created, you also started the nonprofit, the WE Project.

Valerie Berta

So that was more recently. So the Voices Workshop was when I was a grad student, right? So that was a long time ago. And then I went on and I was a photojournalist here and, you know, I just went on with my career and as a journalist, always mindful of doing good work, trying to cover the communities that I was sent to in a respectful and an inclusive and really impactful way. And then I came back to Columbia, as I said, about ten years ago, and then the previous year, the 2016 election happened and that kind of kick-started the project. It was a response to it very directly, even though it was, if you will, the result of years of doing that kind of work and being really interested in doing more, always trying to find ways to do more.

So after the election, there are a lot of new groups happened, a lot of people coming together to try to have an impact and work to minimize the effects of the election and the president in place and his policies. And so I was doing all that. And then I also was thinking there's something more that I can do and what can I do? And then I thought, well, the only thing that I know how to do really well is to take pictures. And so how about I start taking pictures of people that I don't see represented in a fair way and try to create a platform to amplify voices and stories from historically systematically marginalized communities. So that's how the project came to be.

Olivia Maillet

And how do you find these people to photograph? Do you find them just while you're out and about, or are they friends?

Valerie Berta

So when it started, it was, yeah, I reached out to friends and asked them to reach out to their friends and try to widen the pool of people that I could reach that way. And then it became kind of a little bit, you know, as with that, no one in the community. But then again, I will walk into any space and talk to anybody, share the story of the WE project, to pretty much anybody in hopes of finding new people to participate. So I'm still doing that. It's getting a lot of work, as you know, which is a lot of work. You have to be present, you have to be in the community, you have to talk to people. You have to organize. The project developed beyond my wildest dreams. I mean, when I first started, it was like, okay, I'll take a few pictures. I'll try to see if I can find the space to do a website, share those stories, and then it just kind of like ballooned from there with the support of the community. It's been just amazing and I'm so, so grateful.

And then when I turned it into a nonprofit, it gave me and one more meant to amplify it, to widen the project. So applying for grants and

things like that. So the District view in Columbia was a great supporter. They gave me a grant that allowed me to print giant banners and have them on display. They hosted Liberating Stories, which is a panel of the WE project that I created two years ago now. So it's a monthly intersectional panel, what I call participants of the WE project. That's what I call people that I photograph in those and share their stories with me on the platform. So I bring people together and they share this. Each person shares their stories and then from that, sharing from those stories, a conversation usually happens organically from there. So that's liberating stories.

That's also was really supported by the Blue Note and others in the community, including Mizzou and the Bridge with which I hosted them now in partnership. So yeah, a long and very convoluted way of answering your question and it's basically a lot of work. It's talking to people like you, you know being on podcasts like this one, it's trying to make the project known in the community to get as many diverse voices, as many voices as possible from underrepresented under shared, undervalued stories in our community. And I think there is no better time than now to do this.

Olivia Maillet

How would you get the ball rolling on these conversations that you have with the people that you photograph?

Valerie Berta

So the tricky part is the one that you the you know, your previous question, the one you were talking about before, how do I find people who are willing to be vulnerable? Because you have to be to come up and share their stories, be willing to be photographed and put on that platform for everybody to see and read and listen. But once I find those people, I invite them to the studio for a session of photography, for the portrait. It's usually just no longer than between 20 minutes and a half an hour. And then I try to make the process as collaborative as possible because it is still me with all the baggage and the bias that I bring to the table taking the photograph, right? So I want the selection of the portrait that's going to be on the website to be very collaborative. So I do a first editing as I know how to do, and then I share those pictures with the person and we come with a it's usually a there's just a few times where it was, you know, the person didn't really like what I was seeing. And that was something that I learned a lot from.

Again, that bias, that visual representation that is very, very conditioned by all sorts of things where you come from, your culture, your source, your economic background, you know, everything comes into those processes. So it's been a learning experience for me. But usually I'm glad to to think back on it and think that usually it's pretty easy to come to

an agreement on, okay, this is how I want to be represented. This is the picture I like. So then I put that picture on the website.

I ask people for a very short bio and a few words to describe themselves, not necessarily what they do, who they are, how they want to be remembered. And that's why I tell people when I invite them to the studio, I tell them that they need to be dressed the way they want to be remembered. I have been so grateful to have so much come to me from the project, from sharing that with a person that I photograph locally here in Columbia told me that that question, that very simple or I guess directive of please come dressed as you want to be remembered, just sent her on a really long, introspective process of, okay, what does that mean to me? How do I define myself? Visual, you know, all these things and so it was just it was amazing for me to think back on that. Just like for me, it's a simple question. It's a very visual thing to tell people, the only rule that I have is that they cannot have anything written on their clothing because it's distracting in a picture like you don't want anything written, your eyes going to go right on that instead of on the face of the person that you're portraying.

But just that very simple directive, just come to us as you want to be remembered for her was really significant. And so that was great for me. That was really something that was like a gift that she had given me through that and feedback sounds amazing.

Olivia Maillet

Yeah, that really takes a creative mind to tell someone's story through a visual medium.

Valerie Berta

And it does. But also again, I go back to that over and over again because for me it's really at the heart of the project. It's visual representation. How do we see how are people portrayed in the mainstream media or in just like visual culture around us that is not an innocent or an unbiased way of looking at people, of portraying people. It has all sorts of layers of meaning attached to them, right? So you have the white gaze on people who are not white. And in photojournalism, that is a very, very long tradition because photojournalism, as everything else in this country is, was born in a white supremacist country or society or world, rather, and is steeped into that culture. So that white gaze is very significant. You have to recognize that the way that I dream the future of the WE project is to bring people in the process, to work at it with me and to make it a collaborative, really, truly collaborative process. Whereas I'm not just the one taking the picture. A bunch of very diverse people are taking those pictures and putting their way of seeing the world into the project, because right now the truly diverse representation is the stories that people put in their story can be. I tell people it can

be. It's really short as a one line quote, Which somebody gave me one time, or it can be as long as a novel or as a really long narrative, which also somebody else gave me. Or it can be something that is non-narrative, right? I had a very young person give me a drawing because they were not comfortable or that the writing medium was not what they wanted to use in order to communicate what they were about.

Whatever it is that people give me, I don't really want to touch at all, and if I do, it is together with them. So even if it's just like a very simple editorial or a capital letter here, whatever it is, I do it in collaboration and completely together with them because it is their story, in their words. I have nothing to like. There's no bias of mine to come in here. I just put it on the website as it is. And that's really important because that's at the core of the mission of the project.

Olivia Maillet

Yeah, and I think social activist journalism, there's so much collaboration involved and we learn that like you're not supposed to be posing these photos, you're not supposed to be collaborating with who you photograph, right? But then it's just the gaze of you.

Valerie Berta

Exactly. All these layers of meaning of construct that are in that daily. You know, at first glance, very simple picture, right? But it's never simple. There's always layers of meaning behind it. And the way that you are taught photojournalism, the way you are taught journalism even is filled with these layers of meaning and concepts and way of seeing the world. The nonprofit is also super interesting because the input. Have you seen any change? Like do you see your subjects becoming lighter as they're able to tell their story to you? Again, like I go back to the person that I photograph who told me that it was so impactful for her to have me ask her through the very simple, you know, think of, Hey, please, can you dress in the way that you want to be remembered? So those impacts. Yes, I've seen I have at the very beginning of the project, I photographed somebody who was a teacher and I was even back then, I guess I am every day just questioning, you know, why am I doing this? There is absolutely no impact. It doesn't matter. You know, we all have those moments, Right? And so I was telling her about that going, why am I doing this? It's not it's not useful, but, you know, why bother? You take your time to come here and take your picture when it's just all useless. And she was nice to take the time to actually tell me that she was at a grocery store somewhere. Shortly after her picture was published on the website and put on social media channels, which is the last step of the process, right? If people agree, of course, and with their permission. And so she was telling me that she was walking down the aisle at the grocery store and somebody came up to her and started telling her that her story was so impactful and

started crying right there and then telling her about it and how much it had affected her.

I guess there is ways that it does impact people in a way that I will never know – when there's somebody like this person that I photographed will tell me.

Olivia Maillet

That was Valerie Berta on this episode of Vox Voice. The WE project partners with the Bridge at the University of Missouri to have a monthly panel called Liberating Stories, where we project participants heal through storytelling. Berta hopes listening to these stories could potentially change narratives. Be sure to keep tuning in to Vox Voice for more perspectives from your Columbia community. I'm Olivia Maillet.