

My Personal Project – Case Studies

Name: Patricia Fortlage

Name of Project: Wonder, girl!

Is your project primarily about: Culture
SUBJECT STYLE IDEA

Your elevator pitch:

Girls get bombarded with messages about what is seemingly acceptable given their body types or shapes, or hair texture, gender, intelligence, aptitude for sports, music, etc. It is time for a new narrative. It is time that all girls feel empowered to be their authentic selves and to follow their passions. The Wonder, Girl Project is one effort towards that inspiration. It is a project highlighting young women who are not allowing themselves to be limited by stereotypes or by how others might classify them or otherwise think of them. These are young women who are setting a new standard, young women who are doing IT (whatever that special 'it' is for them). The new narrative is BE WHO YOU ARE. Wonder, girl!

Why this project? I complimented a teen girl who had just finished her ballet class; she was extraordinarily good. I asked her if ballet was what she wanted to do with her life. She responded, "Oh no, I can't. I'm Filipino, and I like grunge." What she was saying was that there were no role models for her... no successful Filipino ballerinas (especially those that had a grunge aesthetic) for her to aspire to. This happened again and again as I volunteered with programs like Big Sister. Teens need to see themselves represented. If they don't, they often feel awkward and self-conscious. I realized we need a new narrative for girls. We need them to know that EVERYTHING is possible.

How did you get started with this project? One day I decided to sit down and make a list of all the responses I had gotten from those teens. And then I decided I would go and find a young woman in her twenties (the age group they all seem to be influenced by most) doing just the thing these teens thought didn't exist. The first person I found was a Filipino ballerina. She had never really thought about grunge as a fashion style before, but she was open to it, so we did a photo shoot. And voila; a Filipino ballerina with a grunge aesthetic was now part of the social landscape for girls. And then I found some preppy pro skateboarders, and then a fisherwoman, and on and on. Eventually I realized it really shouldn't be up to me who to photograph, or what stereotypes needed to be broken. I began putting out participant calls on social media, and there was a huge response!

Who is your intended audience? Teen girls (and to a lesser degree, young women).

Do you currently have an online gallery or website we can share? (please include the link) Yes, there are multiple places to see the project. There is a website specifically for the project: www.thewondergirlproject.com, my own website: www.patriciafortlage.com, Instagram @thewondergirlproject (www.instagram.com/thewondergirlproject), and Facebook @wondergirlproject (www.facebook.com/wondergirlproject).

What are some hurdles you've had to overcome? Budget! Personal projects can have an expense associated with them. In my case, even though all of the young women have volunteered their time, I still like to do something nice for them (a small gift card, etc.). There are also expenses around food (both at the initial information meetings and then at the shoot)

and travel. There can sometimes be wardrobe and/or prop expenses, and I often need an assistant or two. I also carry professional insurance, of course (critical for location shoots), etc. etc. The other hurdle is what to do with the project beyond social media. Fortunately, for my target audience, social media is very successful, but, is there life beyond that? That is a big question. And of course, there is a time commitment which is tough when you are a full-time working photographer. You have to find ways to fit the personal project in.

What are some of the shining moments that keep you moving forward? Different publications have picked up portions of the project. And several of the communities that I have photographed in have celebrated their particular participant(s). There are entire bus shelters with panoramas of the project on them; that was fun... and I have won awards for some of the images. I have also been interviewed by publications such as the Huffington Post.

What lessons have you learned along the way? Know who (or what) you are shooting for (the purpose of the project) so you can be sure you are staying on track. Also, I always create a formal project plan up front (scope, deliverables, implementation plan, timeline, intended audience, budget, tools, etc.). I have also learned that there really isn't any real money to be made in books anymore (unless you are a celebrity or influencer with a built in multi-million count following) so I needed to adjust my scope accordingly.

Has your purpose changed at all? Only somewhat. Originally, I thought a big portion of my project would be devoted to developing a book, but I have since learned that books are very expensive to make and they don't end up selling well. Other than that, I am still pretty much on track.

Did the project zig instead of zag? Not really. Having a clearly defined project plan, and doing your research on target audience beforehand is critical. I did have to take a hiatus in the middle due to breast cancer, but I picked right back up as soon as I was healthy enough to do so.

Are you looking at a final product when you didn't have one before? If yes, would you like to explain in a little more detail? Like I mentioned, I originally thought a book might be worth pursuing, but I am fine letting that go.

What are your plans for the project? The goal is to get these images in front of as many teen girls as possible. Social media is key, so that continues. And I will be submitting articles on the issue of stereotypes to publications that target teens and young women in hopes to drive more attention not so much to the project, but to the images themselves. I will also continue to work with local communities to honor the participants as individuals, and I am planning to approach high schools about integrating these images into their efforts to empower teen girls.

Are you hoping to create a final product and if so, what form? (book, travelling show, gallery exhibition, video?) I don't know if it is important to see this project as a whole (i.e. one product). The individual images are what are important. And, I don't know if the project will ever be final. I would like to think I will continue to photograph inspiring young women until there are no longer any stereotypes to be broken.

What steps have you taken to find a publisher, gallery, or other outlet for your project? I have approached publications and nonprofits and schools that can benefit from my project (sometimes those benefits come in the form of content for their readers, sometimes those

benefits come in the form of being on the front lines of social change, etc.). Many programs have a specified submission process (that you can often find online, or you can call and inquire as to the process). I have also contacted nonprofits directly and/or asked community leaders to make introductions. It helps that this project doesn't stray too far from my core photography niche (I specialize in women's issues and community development).

Have you found a publisher, gallery, or other outlet for your project? See above for outlets.

What advice would you give to someone looking to get their project out to the public?

First, determine if there is an audience for your project and determine why this project is important to you. If you are not passionate about your project, no one else is going to be passionate about it (personal projects are a hard sell). Ideally, if you can find someone up front who could sponsor your project (someone or some organization that could benefit equally from it), that is a much more successful way to go.