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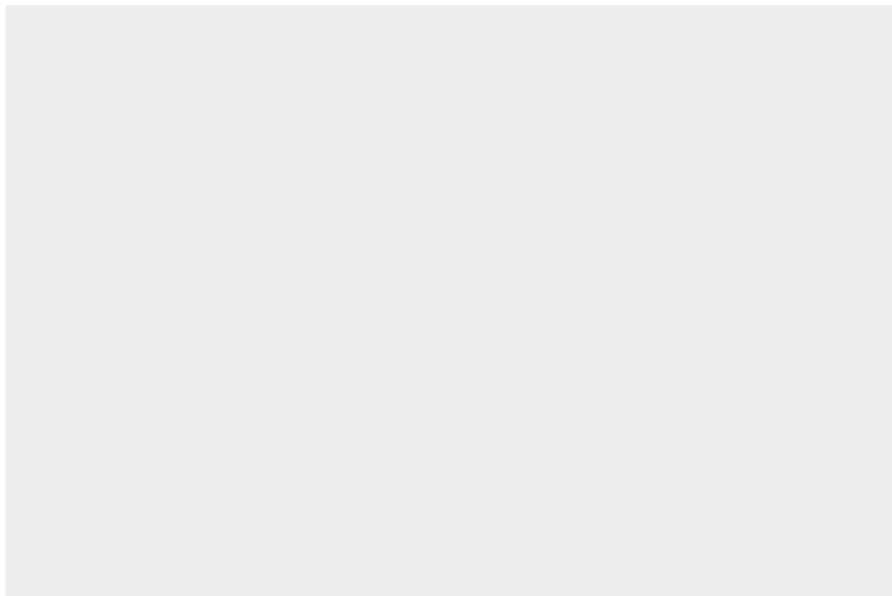


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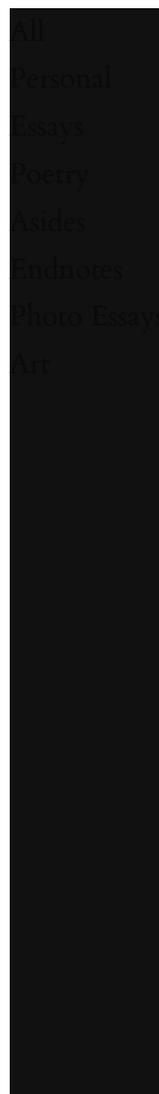
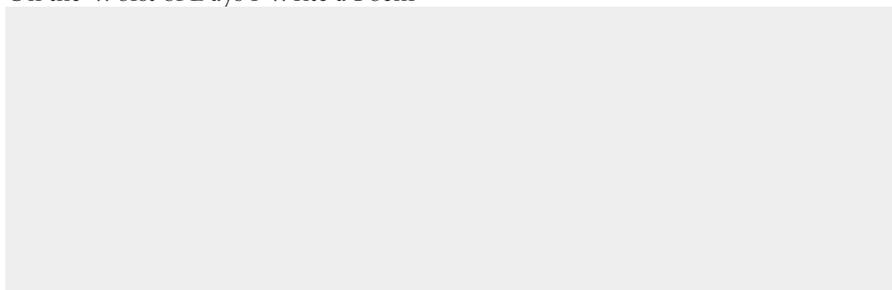
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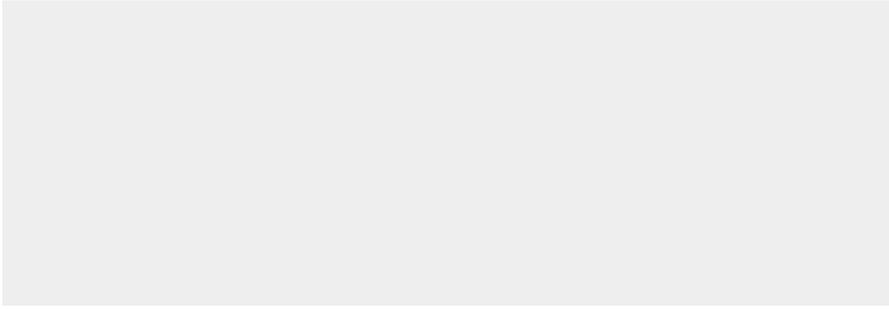
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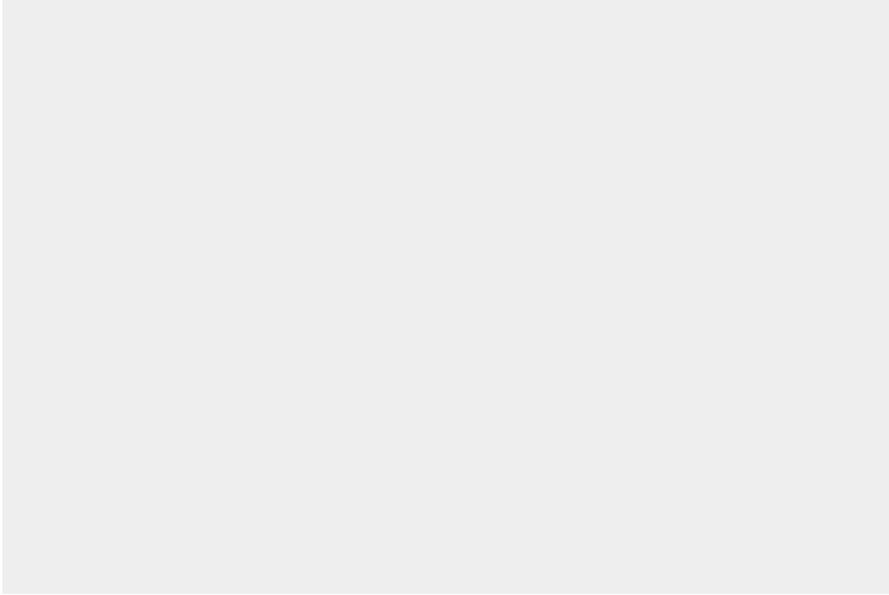


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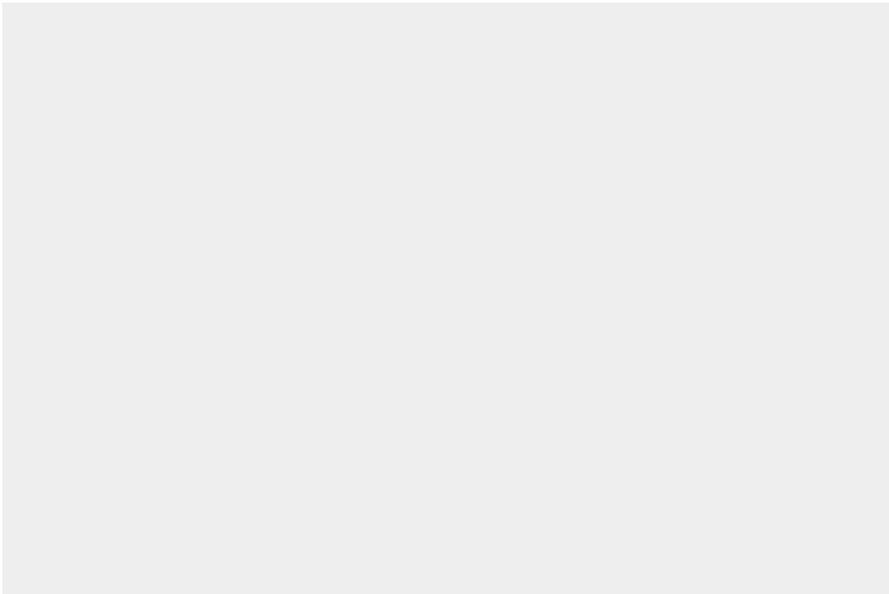




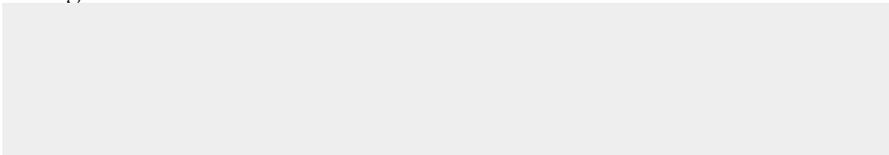
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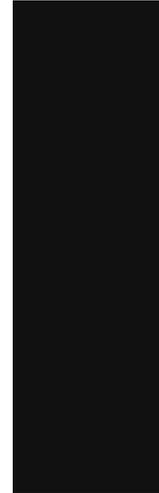
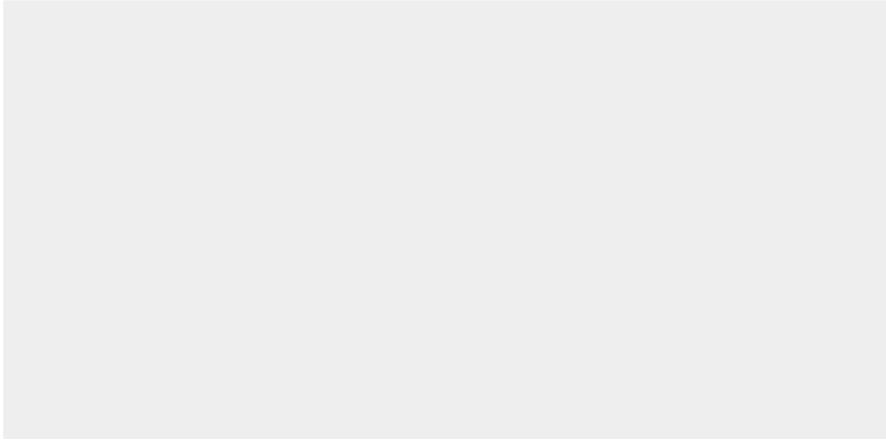


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# An Urban Love Affair

Elizabeth Miles · Snapshots · April 23, 2015



Self-portrait by Chris Randall

Chris Randall spins around to stop a stoop-shouldered elderly woman, moving so quickly that I have to duck his arm. “Hi, Miss, I love

your face—may I take your picture?”

“Sure, where’s it going?”

“I Love New Haven—it’s a website that celebrates people, places, and things in New Haven, and I want to celebrate you!”

“Nah, that’s all right.”

Randall shrugs off the rejection. “I always start out thinking, oh, no one’s going to let me do this, no one’s going to want me to take their picture—but you just do it, you just ask anyway, and you end up with a post. The rejection rate is about fifty-fifty.”

His smile drops a little. “Maybe I’m weirding people out by saying, ‘I love your face.’”

Randall, a professional photographer, has made a career out of such enthusiasm. Hard to miss with his blaring bike horn, he first met his I Love New Haven collaborator, Jeffrey Kerekes, near their homes in Wooster Square. He and Kerekes—a psychotherapist and amateur photographer—established the ILNH site in 2012. Since then, five regular photographers have joined the photography team, and ILNH has accrued over eight thousand Facebook followers.

Like Brandon Stanton’s *Humans of New York*, ILNH often employs a candid plus caption format—except with a universally positive vibe. It has highlighted Boxing in Faith, a nonprofit gym that trains at-risk youth to box, and the Under 91 project, which decorated the underpass below the highway with public art. Yancey Hitt, a student at Wilbur Cross High School, contributed a photo essay on New Haven Reads, the community book bank and tutoring program.

While the oft-T-shirted and gift-mug’d phrase “I Love New York,” is universally recognized, “I Love New Haven” is still catching on. The ILNH site is an evolving project, rather than a viral feel-good phenomenon, or a larger-scale tourism campaign. But Randall dreams big: he wants to radically rebrand the city through a glossy photo makeover. Whether this is grounded in residents’ true feelings about their city is unclear. Who is the “I” in I Love New Haven?

Walking through Yale’s campus, we pass a tall couple. The man has stubble and neon-rimmed glasses, so Randall jumps in. “Hi, I like you guys’ faces, can I take your picture?” The woman just walks away, and the man shakes his head, “Oh no, no, n—”

“C’mon, I’m Chris.”

“I know who you are, I do. I work for Market New Haven, so we repost a lot of your stuff—but no.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m behind the scenes like you are, man!”

Randall laughs, and after pressing him once more unsuccessfully, turns onto York Street. Stopping a student, he tells her he likes the contrast between her hair and the leaves. “Can I ask you to make a funny face?” She sticks out her tongue and half-closes her eyes. A masterpiece, and Randall’s first “yes.” The fifty-fifty rejection rate had to turn over sometime.

Whenever you see him on the street, Randall is chatting animatedly with strangers, or whirling abruptly to salute a friend half a block away. Kerekes, a 35-year-old with glasses and greying brown hair, is the quieter half of ILNH, the pragmatist to Randall’s dreamer.

Still, Kerekes has been known to step from behind the lens into the public eye. In 2011, frustrated with high taxes, he ran for mayor of New Haven, challenging the eighteen-year incumbent John DeStefano Jr. Kerekes, a newcomer, lost by only ten percent, though DeStefano outspent him by over a half million dollars.

Randall has political experience too: he worked for the New Haven Land Trust and co-chaired Ward 8 from 2003 to 2013. However, he made his name as a photographer by sneaking into Mill River's defunct and contaminated English Station power plant, ignoring warnings that the site was toxic and that he could be arrested for trespassing.

Together, Randall and Kerekes see ILNH as a way to—in the words of their website—"Promote Community Engagement and Civic Pride." Randall cited the Inside Out New Haven photo series as an example of what photography could accomplish. In 2012, he and other Inside Out photographers mounted four-by-six-foot black-and-white portraits of New Haven residents onto the underpasses that divide neighborhoods around State Street. Drivers would stop, meet each other, get their photo taken, and then continue on.

For Kerekes, ILNH is an effort to shift the media's focus away from crime reports. "If it bleeds, it leads,' seems to be the policy. When I was 30, I moved to New Haven, and its reputation just didn't match the experience." A neighbor told him he shouldn't go out after dark. "I laughed at him, but he was dead serious."

We lapse into technical conversations about RAW files and Photoshop, how best to organize memory cards. Kerekes gives no gratuitous smiles. He talks with his eyebrows instead. When I ask whether or not he loves the Elm City more after founding ILNH, his eyebrows shoot up and then knit themselves together as he considers his answer. He pauses, and then says he isn't sure. But do his subjects? "Some do, some don't," he says.

He leans forward and whispers, "That's why we chose the name, I Love New Haven. After a while, hopefully people feel that way."

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With Randall, New Haven seems like a smaller version of itself, one where a police officer on a bike waves to us in a quiet neighborhood. Randall photographs a security guard who worked with him at the Winchester factory when he made shotgun barrels from 1998 to 1999. He also runs into a law professor and a hot dog stand owner in a space of fifteen feet, and embraces them as close personal friends. The Yale Security guard in front of Willoughby's yells across York Street that Randall just missed the Ashley's ice cream truck—he knows that Randall goes to Ashley's almost every day.

But is the city cropped too narrowly through ILNH's lens, the "Main Street" it represents an idyll constructed by a dreamer and a pragmatist?

As I browsed the posts on ILNH's website with Carlton Heath, a 20-year-old chemistry student at Gateway Community College and a friend of Kerekes's, he asked where the photos of Newhallville were.

"Growing up there, I've seen everything. There's a basketball court off Shelton Avenue, and once I was just having fun, playing basketball, and four teenagers on bicycles, in broad daylight—they started shooting at it. And they rode off so casually, like nothing happened." Heath smiles bitterly. "Every night they used to shoot, every single night. And that's still the way it is, it's just not being put on the news as often."

Yet, several months later, in March 2015, Heath invited Kerekes to follow him through Newhallville. They took dozens of pictures, including a portrait of Heath at a basketball court. Heath wrote in the ILNH.com post, "There may not be luxurious homes and buildings over here but there are many luxurious people with dreams and ideas for bettering this community."

Randall could have said the same. He, at least, feels that ILNH has brought him closer to his neighbors across the city. "Maybe it's just because I've taken pictures so much...But I want us to feel like we're all in this together, and this is a good place to be." After following his path through downtown, I feel like I've observed an organic experiment in cross-city intimacy. Randall is an optimist, undoubtedly, but as the site's popularity increases, feedback from residents like Heath has the potential to alter its direction, expanding the edges of

the frame.

ILNH is rooted in a love of photography, the spontaneous connection of a street portrait. “Ultimately, what I want to do is depict people as people. To me, everybody has a story and everybody has an interesting face,” Randall says.

Stick around New Haven long enough, and he’ll let you know in person.

#APRIL 2015 | VOLUME 47 NUMBER 5

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#ELIZABETH MILES

#HUMANS OF NEW HAVEN

#I LOVE NEW HAVEN

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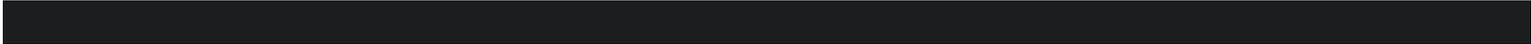
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