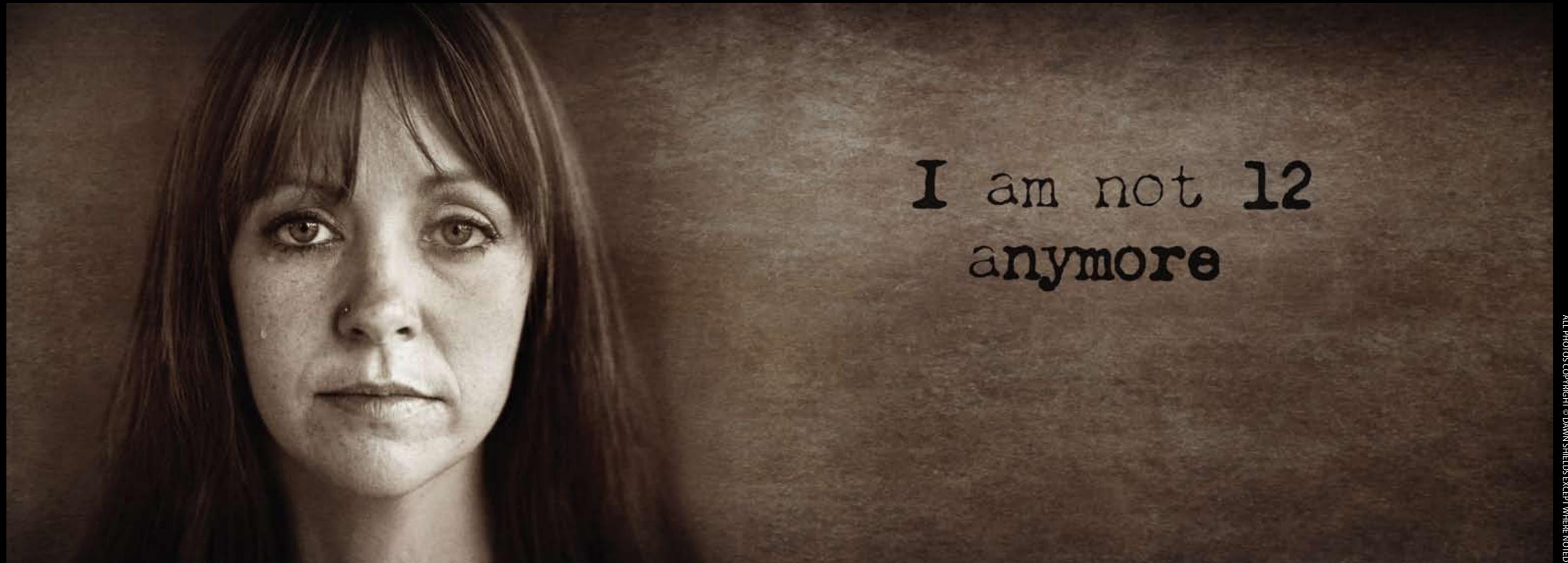


Dawn Shields' Legacy

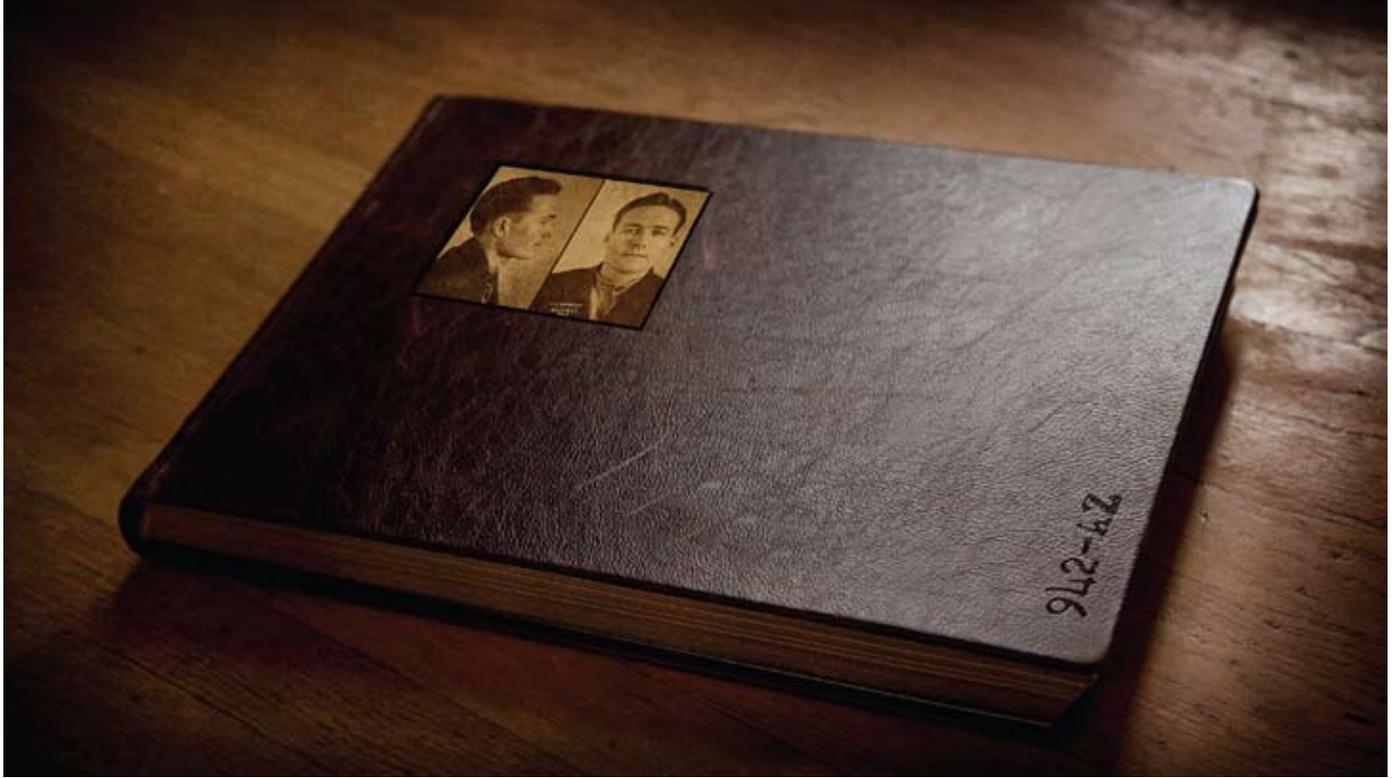
By Jennifer Chen



I am not 12
anymore

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After the acclaimed *To Kill a Mockingbird*, author Harper Lee never wrote another book. She felt she had written her story; there was nothing left to tell. Photographer Dawn Shields recently did the same. She told her one story and did so in awe-inspiring fashion. On Wednesday, March 10, 2010, at the MGM Grand, Dawn Shields' Grand Award-winning album, "Legacy," struck a crowd of over 2000 photographers to utter silence. When the lights came up, Dawn turned to the podium to speak and was greeted by a thunderous standing ovation.

"It was shocking to learn that I had won," Dawn shares. "I remember thinking, 'A wedding album always wins.' When Bambi [Cantrell] and Jim [Garner] announced, 'This one's going to be fun. Let's just say it together,' I thought, 'But the guy who won isn't even here.' I think I looked over at Yervant and he hugged me. I don't think I even looked at my husband. I was just shocked. I never expected it. It was a gritty, dirty album. I always expect the Grand Award album to be happy and pristine."

Dirty and gritty it was, along with controversial, jaw-dropping and emotionally charged. Dawn's album, entered in the event non-wedding category, left an indelible mark on every person who viewed it. Documenting the life of her grandfather, John Raymond Kahl Jr., simply known to Dawn as "Papa Jack," the album, in 50 stunning images, reveals a secret life that Dawn had never known about her grandfather—he was a killer.

The details slowly unfold for the viewer with images and hauntingly simple text. Jack's Alcatraz inmate number, 942-AZ, is imprinted deeply into the album cover, like a cow branding, alongside his mug shot. Dawn begins with, "Truth at 12... my dear papa was the killer." Then she continues with Jack's seven prison escapes; eleven suicide attempts; fingerprints pressed against paperwork; and January 9, 1952—the date Jack was taken to Alcatraz Island, the federal prison in the San Francisco Bay that closed in 1963.

We see Dawn's journey as she does, venturing down abandoned jail cell hallways, finding his cell—she says with black text, "I found your home." One panel of the album holds the words, "I always thought you were a doctor... you said you worked at the hospital," which is placed right before an image of Dawn standing at the window of an empty, decrepit Alcatraz operating room. It ends with, "I am not 12 anymore," and the last shot is of Dawn's eyes and a single tear.

Dawn's road to this very personal project began about two years ago when her sister Tracey called her and told her, "You're not going to believe what I found. I Googled Grandpa Jack's name and found out that he was inmate number 942 in Alcatraz." The news shocked Dawn, who had been told by Jack that he was in Alcatraz, but as a child she simply thought it was a joke. She comments, "It was never something I took seriously. As soon as she told me, I looked it up and called the Alcatraz archive office.

An archive tech there found his file and said, 'Your grandfather's file is the same size as Al Capone's. I can send you his rap sheet [a list of a criminal's offenses] but to warn you, it's eight to 10 pages long.' On September 2, 2008, after receiving Jack's rap sheet, Dawn made her first trip to the Alcatraz archive office, which coincided with a wedding she was shooting in the Bay Area. Reading through his files, Dawn pieced together a hidden past of a grandfather she loved dearly. She comments, "He kept his past fairly hidden from all of us."

During one visit to the area, Dawn told photographer Bambi Cantrell her story and Bambi strongly encouraged her to put the images together in an album for her family. Inspired by Bambi, Dawn spent a year photographing Alcatraz and compiling a 50-page album from over 2500 images she had shot. "I knew that I wasn't going to know what I needed until I was at my computer."



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Dawn took only a camera bag with a few lenses (70–200mm f/2.8L; 24–70mm f/2.8L; 24mm f/1.4L; 85mm f/1.2L; 16–35mm f/2.8L; 15mm fisheye) because she knew that inside the jail cell it would be dark. She approached her shooting as a photographer and as a granddaughter. On her first trip to the now-defunct prison, Dawn shot hundreds of images. “The majority of my trip was from a granddaughter’s perspective to see where my grandfather ate lunch, where he lived, to see the library where he worked and the visitor’s area. Since there are certain areas you’re not allowed to enter, I ended up talking to a ranger and telling him my story, and he took me to an operation room.” From an artistic point of view, Dawn “was intrigued by where the light was coming from and what was a good angle to shoot from.” Dawn spent a couple of hours in her two trips to Alcatraz documenting hallways of cells, the lunchroom, the grounds and the yards.

Over the course of six months, the process of editing the album was gut wrenching for Dawn, who says that there were times she would get a headache or feel sick to her stomach. “When I had the album up on the screen, I felt so many different feelings—frustrated, mad, sad. There were

times when I didn’t ever want to see it again.” The goal of the project was never album competition but to bring together a family history for her mother, father, brother and sister that they had never known. Dawn’s camera was her family’s only window into Papa Jack’s past life.

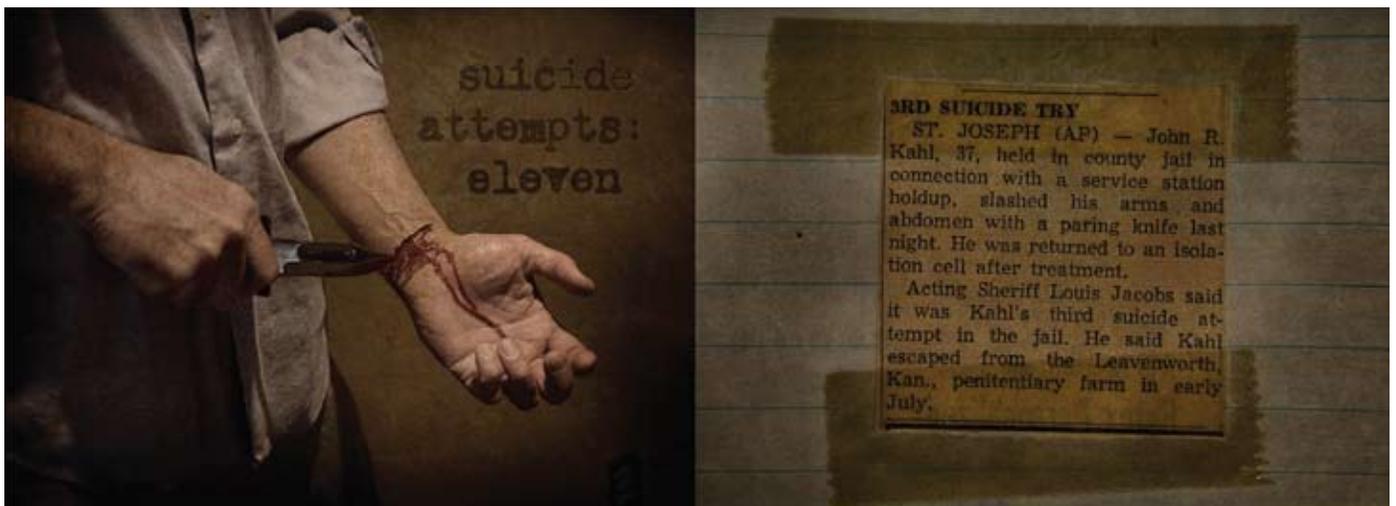
Her family’s reaction was nothing short of what Dawn had experienced herself. Says Dawn, “It was emotional for all of them. My grandmother still hasn’t even seen the album—she went through a lot with my papa—but she’s hugged me and told me how proud my grandfather would be of me. He wanted us to succeed at what we loved.” Combing through federal files and recollecting what Jack had told her, Dawn established a narrative, and then she photographed newspaper clippings and his files to composite the final album images. “He has a lot of history in a lot of states,” she says. “I haven’t gotten all of his files. The aliases I used in my album were solely from his federal file.”

What is presented in “Legacy” is just a portion of Jack’s complete story. A compelling detail that Dawn decided not to put into her album was something she discovered after her grandfather’s suicide. When her husband’s grandfather—a retired

prison guard—had given his condolences after Jack’s death, Dawn asked him if he had known her grandfather. After Dawn shared Jack’s full name, he commented, “I’ll never forget him. He was the only prisoner who ever escaped me.” Dawn continues, “When I archived the Springfield, MO-prison records, I found out that he was the guard in charge of my grandfather.”

Dawn’s journey to complete the album was filled with support and guidance from many friends and colleagues. “I had multiple friends look at it to give me their opinions. The girls in my office—Whitney, Kyla and Megan—were with me the whole time. I didn’t know how to make smoke for the gun image, so one of my girls learned how. I am so thankful for the girls who work with me because for a year my office was fairly sad. On my second trip to Alcatraz, a couple of friends went with me for moral support and helped me carry my bags. My friend Michael Muramoto, who lives in the area, was also very supportive.”

Entering “Legacy” into WPPI Album Competition was not a decision that Dawn made lightly. She shares, “I never felt sure about it. It was a stressful album for me. I had no idea how it would be received. I wanted to hear critiques, but I didn’t know





how it was going to make me feel at the time. Any time you're working on a project that is so personal and about someone that meant so much to [you], it's hard." She continues, "I wasn't a hundred percent sure about entering it into competition, but everyone around me said that it was going to be great. The last time I watched the album before sending it in, I was worried and insecure." But Dawn didn't let her worries overcome her and instead focused on the story she wanted to tell. "I ultimately decided to enter my album because I wanted to know what other people thought of the story," she explains. "I never expected it to get a 95. I thought it would, at best, get an 82 in terms of storytelling. I knew the imagery was good and the story was good, but it was so different than anything ever entered before. Whenever you put your heart into something, you're worried about what everyone is going to think."

RangeFinder editor-in-chief Bill Hurter recalls when he first saw the album in its entirety in competition. It was a moment he'll never forget. Bill says, "When I saw the album I said to myself, 'This changes everything.' It's a radical departure from traditional album storytelling that involves cinematic techniques and relies heavily on creative typographic applications."

Bill wasn't the only one who was drawn to the album. After the awards ceremony, photographers who congratulated her on her album and truthful storytelling told their own stories to Dawn. "A woman came up to me with tears in her eyes and told me that her mother committed suicide when she was 7 and she was always ashamed of it, but my album helped her."

When Dawn accepted her award, she felt honored to have Bambi Cantrell and Jim Garner present it, especially since Bambi was her inspiration to begin the album. "To have Bambi and Jim up there, who have been such friends and mentors to me, it was really meaningful. If Yervant was up there, it would've been complete. They all have influenced me so much. It was such a surprise. I'm still in shock."

For WPPI Award Ceremony host Bambi Cantrell, giving the award to Dawn was just as memorable. Comments Bambi, "Dawn winning the Grand Award for her amazing grandfather's story was such a proud moment for me. I've watched this girl grow as a photographer, taking critical talk in stride, using each negative experience for positive growth."

Dawn shares, "My whole reason for putting it into competition was to show my storytelling abilities. I was curious how the

judges would judge the album in terms of that. Everyone has stories about their family that they may be embarrassed or ashamed about. I made peace with my past, so I was okay showing my story to people. Since WPPI, people have been emailing me and telling me that they are going to do personal projects. A photographer told me that she wants to do a story on autism because she photographs her autistic brother."

Dawn's album broke unspoken boundaries in competition and has forever changed many who have seen it. Dawn is humble about her album and grateful to tell her story. She knows that what she has documented is her truth only. She concludes, "By no means do I want to outdo myself next year. I told my story and this is my one album. This is my one moment."

To view Dawn's entire Grand Award-winning album online, visit www.rangefinder.com. View Dawn's work on her Web site and blog at www.dawnshields.com and www.dawnshieldsblog.com.



Jennifer Chen is the former features editor for both RangeFinder and AfterCapture magazines as well as the former editor of the WPPI Monthly Newsletter. She has written for Everyday with Rachael Ray, Bust, VegNews, Audrey and is a theatre critic for the online publication Edge. She blogs regularly at www.typecraft.wordpress.com.

