

## I KNOW WHAT IT MEANS...

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Ralph J. Romaguera, Sr. M.Photog., Hon. M. Photog., CR., CPP, API, F-ASP

One of the most famous New Orleanians, the great musician Louis Armstrong, wrote the song "Do you know what it means to miss New Orleans." The song goes on to talk about "The moonlight on the bayou...a Créole tune...that fills the air...I dream...about magnolias in bloom...and I'm wishin' I was there. New Orleans is the land of dreamy dreams. It is the Crescent City – it is the Big Easy!"

Growing up in New Orleans was great! It was the Sunday morning "streetcar" ride up Canal Street. It was meandering through the French Quarter to the St. Louis Cathedral, and after mass a walk past the artists and musicians that filled Jackson Square. To top the morning off, it was Café au Lait and Beignets (coffee and donuts). One day, I thought, maybe people would hear me play or see my work.

As a young boy, I had the opportunity twice to go to a Kiwanis sponsored camp. I loved the camp. Little did I know that it was a camp for indigent boys. Never did my mother or two sisters ever tell me we were poor.

Then one November night my mother and I went around the corner to Miss Rita's house for the Friday night ladies' card game. Miss Rita also had a son named Ralph. We always played until we got tired, usually 9 o'clock. Forty-five years ago the streets were safe to walk around the block, until that night.

I saw what appeared to be a very large man climbing out of my bedroom window. The main thing he stole was the one hundred dollars my mother had been saving for Christmas presents. Once again, Kiwanis was there. They found out about my mother's plight and gave us a hundred dollars so Christmas would not be spoiled. I know that one day I was going to be a Kiwanian; I wanted to be able to help some other mom and her kid.

When I was of high school age, I went to an all boys' Catholic high school. St. Aloysius was located one block outside of the French Quarter. It was a great school taught by the Brothers of the Sacred Heart. With the windows open, you could hear the vendors walking the street shouting, but also singing-things like "I gotta watermelon and I got it now."

I am so appreciative of the Brothers for the education they gave me. They taught much more than just reading and writing. They prepared us to be young men. They taught fear of the Lord and fear of the paddle.

Brother Lee Barker was my principal and fair man. My mother had to visit Brother Lee to ask for a little extra time to pay my \$25 per month tuition. I learned a couple of lessons from the two greatest people in my young life; from Brother Lee to be kind and considerate; from Mom that no matter how little or how large the debt, face the person and let them know how you will pay it back. Back then I thought that maybe one day I could pay for some kid's education.

The best way I could show my appreciation to Mom and Brother Lee was with good grades-I finished with a 3.8. So off to LSUNO I went, not knowing what I really wanted to be.

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The first semester I got a 2.3 and my best friend from the band Bill LaGrange got a .8. We had found out what girls, beer and fraternities were all about!

After a couple of beers that next Friday night, I asked Bill what he really wanted to do. Of course, he was thinking of the next bar. "NO, really, let's join the Navy in the morning" I said. In his not so sober voice he responded, "If you are crazy enough to go, so will I". He spent the night at my house and the next morning we were off to the recruiter.

After a week of tests and a physical, we once again sat in front of the recruiter. He asked, "What would you like to be?" Bill's reply was "What do you have to offer?" "How's about aviation jet mechanic?" the recruiter asked. "No." Bill replied "we really don't like to get our hands dirty." "What about Airman Ordinance?" offered the recruiter? When the recruiter explained that it was loading bombs, Bill once again decided against it.

"How's about a nice easy air conditioned office job, folding parachutes and you go to New Jersey. It's just like folding towels and you will be home in 5 months." "Great!" was Bill's reply, "Heck, we have never been north of Baton Rouge!" Then the recruiter said we get to jump out of a plane with the first ones we packed. Bill then yelled "Hell no! What else do you have to offer?"

The recruiter, just about to lose patience with us, said the only thing else I have is photography, but you didn't declare that as one of your interests. Bill said, "Ralph, tell them about the darkroom we have at your house." I didn't even know how to load an instamatic! So, off we went to Pensacola Florida for basic photography training. During our training, I saw a movie titled "Blow Up". Now 18 years old, this movie about this cool guy, photographing these cool chicks, got me thinking this might be the profession for me.

I instantly fell in love with creating images. Yes, I do remember my first shot of the 4x5 camera case. Yes, I do remember the magic of developing the film and seeing the image come up in the pan. After 5 months, 26 days and 10 hours of temporary duty, we were heading home to enroll back in college. The roles now reversed, Bill turned out to be a good student and finished college while I staggered through courses not caring about anything but the camera.

Living with a camera around my shoulder, I was in the right place at the right time and the local daily newspaper ran some of my images. They then asked me to be on the staff. Now I felt like a real photographer.

One day I was doing head shots of a debutante in the newspaper's studio, and they waited for me to process the film and make a contact sheet. The girl's face showed her satisfaction with my work, and the mother said, "You ought to become professional." Even though I took it as an insult, my mother taught me to just say "Thank You". I thought to myself, "I am a professional – I make \$125 per week and I have a car allowance!"

But I thought more and more about her statement. She really liked what I did – maybe I could be a portrait photographer and own my own studio one day. My new wife was selling

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bridal gowns at a little boutique and she was able to send leads my way. Soon, I was making more money on the weekends than I was at my full time job. Life was going to be great at \$160 per wedding! She was 8 months pregnant with Ralph Jr when I quit the Times Picayune.

One of the first things I did was to join the Professional Photographers of Louisiana. It exposed me to what the lady meant by "professional". I was consumed with print competition – I knew I had a lot to learn.

I then started to travel to the Mississippi/Alabama convention, the Georgia convention; anywhere I could soak up knowledge. Meisel Photochrome lab started putting on seminars with some of the now legends: Monte and Sandi Zucker, Leon Kennemer, Joseph and Martha Zeltzman, Frank Cricchio and Al Gilbert. In Atlanta or Rochester, Kodak put on lectures by a gentleman named Andy Purdome. Donald Jack was probably the most influential speaker of all; I thought one day maybe I could be good enough to be a speaker, and be able to share and educate the new photographer.

I strongly believe that God's purpose for everyone is to serve, to share and to build.

Now as a grown man, I have the opportunity to be a Kawanian, going through the ranks all the way to Lieutenant Governor. Kiwanis' motto is to serve and to build. Together with many friends, we have built new clubs, built playgrounds, given to orphanages and to serve the less fortunate.

On the professional side, I have been very blessed with having made so many great friends over the last thirty plus years, but never did I realize the bonds until August 29, 2005.

My great city was devastated by the largest natural disaster to ever hit America. Katrina took away our music, our art, our restaurants and our people. Ten months later over 200,000 folks are still not home. New Orleans will never be the same – ever. Hopefully it will be better, but it will take a long, long time.

It took a week to even get internet service 80 miles away where we had evacuated. There were over 700 email messages with prayers and well wishes from photography friends.

Many photographers graciously offered us work and their homes. Ralph Jr., Ryan and I went to California to work and just get a break from the rebuilding work we had been doing. Randy and Linda Brister gave us a place to stay and fed us. We were able to help him with his very busy season in October. It had been two months without clients; multiply that by four studios and you feel the financial pinch we were experiencing.

Twenty-six photographers and their friends from all over the United States and Canada, some I knew and some I met for the first time, came in during Thanksgiving week to help build out our outdoor studio. Organizations like PPA and WPPI sent in money as fast as they could. Many of us were on unemployment and food stamps not knowing when or if we would be back in business. I will never forget the efforts of Cheryl Ridgeway and Johnny Burroughs; so many of our vendors came to our rescue, like Off the Wall Productions, Norman and Kodak.

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I had a meeting, trying to see what the needs of the local photographers were. It was great to see the faces of my friends. The best quote of the night was when George Kushler, a young photographer, said, "I now know why I pay my dues." More than a magazine, more than a competition, more than any convention, our friends are what we gain by belonging.

I have traveled extensively since the storm; everywhere I go the question "How is New Orleans?" is asked. It is impossible to put the answer into words. You have to see it and live it to believe it.

No way can anyone understand, feel the pain, or the sorrow. You just have to live it. In my travels since the destruction of my city I have never felt so much like an outsider, displaced from what I love and remember. As Fats Domino sang: "No matter where I roam, New Orleans is my home." So I must say; "I do know what it means to miss New Orleans."

My joy is that God continues to give me the opportunity every day to make music and art through my photography. I hope I make Him proud.