

# *Images for all time*

## *There's the story ... and the story behind it*

Documentary filmmaker **Mark Birnbaum** likes to fade into the shadows and let his subjects tell their story. Photographer **Byrd Williams IV** eliminates personalities entirely and freezes his subjects stock-still for five seconds. Together, the visual artists are chronicling 21st-century North Texans in a manner that should endure for millennia.

Williams and Birnbaum shared the story of the massive Walking Dead Project, which will eventually yield an estimated 600 images, and the documentary that tracks it in a [video interview](#) with Fort Worth SPJ board member **Sarah Macias** and a Zoom Q&A session Jan. 27.

The pair also collaborated on “Proof,” both a book and a documentary that encompass 100 years of Williams family prints, negatives, equipment and journals. University of North Texas Special Collections bought it all in 2014. In early 2020, Williams took his great-grandfather’s 19-century camera and plowed proceeds from the UNT sale into funding The Walking Dead.

“I’ve made them (prints) all of the most permanent materials I could find,” he said, “where you soak in gold and soak in silver and selenium (a chemical element for toning). That way, they have not a hundred-year life like digital prints (but) as long as 400 to 800 years.” UNT will keep the photos temperature perfect, “and after we’re all gone, everybody who’s in the collection is gone,” anthropologists will get to examine “how we dressed, our faces, population movements. This is pure social science, not vanity or art or any of that.”

Williams is producing 12-by-14-inch plates for faces and 16-by-20-inch plates for full-length images of each subject, dressed in everyday garb. (“Our clothes end up marking our culture and saying a lot about what we are and what our culture is.”)

The plates can only be developed a few at a time, and the process requires three days. The black and white images, taken with a five-second exposure (much quicker than in the 19th century), are stark and revealing. His subjects can’t smile and can’t move. “They stand against the wall, exactly like they shot them in the 19th century. It’s why everyone looks so grim in those photos. That big camera turns it into a ritual.”

When Birnbaum heard of the project he knew “here was this amazing visual part of the story that was just there for the taking.” He approaches his craft the opposite of Williams as he chronicles his subjects acting and reacting.

“Byrd’s exposure is for five or six seconds, and mine can be for 45 minutes. And I can allow whatever it is to unfold, and then I edit.” His demeanor never changes once he begins shooting. “In about 20 minutes I’m translucent, and in a half hour I’m transparent. Nobody sees me anymore.”

Birnbaum said he's careful not to get in people's faces. "That's what works for me, and it has worked for me for a long time. And the fact that the cameras get smaller and more light sensitive makes it easier to be there and record what's happening."

The technology enabled Birnbaum to record the development process for *The Walking Dead* in real time. "(Photography) has always been magic to me. As Byrd says, they're always talking about the print coming up in development. That's the magic. I was able to bring 21st-century video technology to Byrd's 19th-century technology. I could shoot in his darkroom like it was yellow daylight and watch print after print after print come up."

The *Walking Dead* Project sprang partly from Williams' appreciation for European portraiture that offers a visual history of several hundred years. And he wanted to create a record of life in the 21st century. He said:

"It was time for me, I'm at an age where I have to give something back."

— *Robert Bohler*

*among the faces in Byrd's world ...*

