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## Jay Dickman: The Eyes of a Story

By Lynne Eodice | Apr 1, 2008

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All Images © Jay Dickman

*Jay Dickman is a Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer who has covered stories as diverse as the war in El Salvador, the Super Bowl, the Olympics, national political conventions, and the 40th Anniversary of the Bombing of Hiroshima. He's done over 25 assignments for National Geographic, and his images have also appeared in Life, Conde Nast Traveler, TIME, Fortune, Sports Illustrated, and GEO, among many others. His work has also appeared in 15 "Day in the Life" books, and he has co-authored the book, Perfect Digital Photography with Adobe expert Jay King.*



Fisherman Silhouette on Aeolian Boat

*Dickman is the founder of FirstLight Workshops, and has hosted digital photo workshops in such diverse locations as the Mid-Pyrenees of France, Dubois, Wyoming, and Maryland. Recently, he has been the official National Geographic photographer on board the Endeavour ship in conjunction with Lindblad Expeditions. He has also worked with National Geographic's Photo Camp, where he has worked with young photographers from underserved communities.*

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When asked how he first became interested in photography—and photojournalism in particular—Jay Dickman replies, “I think a lot of it was the product of growing up in the 1950s and '60s when we had *LIFE* and *National Geographic* as our ‘windows’ to the world; they were our TVs.” This brought coverage of the Vietnam War, moon missions, civil rights issues and world stories into people’s living rooms. “Looking back, I didn’t realize how this was forming my direction and energy.”

### **The Magic of Discovery**

When he was in high school in Dallas, Texas, a woman at a local camera store where he got his film developed praised Dickman’s photography. “I thought I was so cool with a telephoto attachment on my instamatic,” he remembers. “The woman said, ‘if you think that’s cool, wait until you see this camera’—it was a Honeywell Pentax H1A that cost around \$139.” His 16th

birthday was approaching, and his dad offered to “bite the bullet” and get his son something really nice. Although it represented a lot of money, his dad bought him the camera for his birthday. Dickman saved some money and bought a small darkroom kit. “I remember talking to my girlfriend on the phone,” he recalls, “and was working with my little 5x7-inch developing tray. I remember when the image came up and I dropped the phone. I thought, ‘this is magic!’”

When he was in college, Dickman decided to pursue photography as a career, much to the chagrin of his father. “I wasn’t smart enough to listen to him,” he chuckles. “I didn’t realize just how tough this business was.” He discovered that he loved images of life, particularly those that captured the human condition. After just a few days of perusing newspaper want ads in the Dallas area, he found a job with a small sports agency shooting Southwest Conference Football and other sports. “I got paid \$5 a game to go photograph this stuff,” he says. This also gave him the opportunity to build his portfolio.

## Going International

He decided it was time to begin approaching newspapers and news services. “I didn’t know that my book really wasn’t at that level,” he says. “I approached AP (Associated Press), and they said, ‘this is interesting; keep shooting.’” Then he approached both newspapers in Dallas, which included the *Times-Herald*. The Director of Photography, John Mazziotta, saw promise in the young man’s work. Soon he got a call from Mazziotta after one of the *Herald’s* staff photographers quit. “On Friday he told me, ‘the job is yours,’ and it scared the hell out of me,” Dickman recalls. One of the staff photographers at the time was Bob Jackson, who had received a Pulitzer Prize in 1964 for his image of the slaying of Lee Harvey Oswald.

It was the early 1970s, and Dickman found the *Herald* to be a bit intimidating at first, but soon realized that it was an awesome learning environment with a stable of talented photographers. He began shooting 2–4 assignments a day. Shortly thereafter, the Los Angeles-based Times Mirror Corporation bought the *Herald* and brought in a new editor and staff. They expanded the paper’s coverage of local news and it went from being an afternoon paper to becoming a morning newspaper. “We started off slowly covering stories around Texas and across the U.S.,” he says. “And then we started moving into international news. It was an amazing education for me.” The formerly sleepy *Herald* became one of the major photographic papers in the U.S., and assigned Dickman to major news events of the day, such as the Santa Fe Prison riots, a volcano in South America, and the anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima. And depending on where the event was taking place, says Dickman, “the paper would sometimes hire a Lear jet to get us there.”

“The paper really gave you the stage to produce your work,” Dickman states. In 1982, the *Herald* sent Dickman on the first of three excursions to cover the war in El Salvador. Altogether, he



Janis Joplin, Texas Pop Music Festival



Gentoo Penguin Feet, Antarctic Peninsula

spent three months in this war-torn environment. “The body of work I did down there won the 1983 Pulitzer Prize,” he says. “Newspaper photography has always been an amazing world for me.”

### **Changing Times**

In 1979, a woman who Dickman would eventually marry was hired as a lab tech for the Herald and eventually became a staff photographer. *American Photo* magazine once included her as one of the top five upcoming photographers in the U.S. Becky quit her job at the paper during the early '80s before the couple married, and Dickman says, “She’s been one my biggest supporters and editor.” Eventually, he and Becky decided to move out of Texas. Dickman called one of his friends at the *Denver Post*. “Again, it was a great amount of synchronicity and timing,” he says. The *Post* had just brought in Jim Preston as the head of

photography, and they created a position for Dickman as a special-projects photographer who would propose major story ideas.

The Dickmans made Denver, Colorado their home in 1986, but the timing was bad. After they moved to Denver, a major department store chain went out of business because of the declining economy—one that had provided huge advertising revenue for the *Post*. The newspaper immediately imposed a hiring freeze and it suffered cutbacks and layoffs. “The whole plan of being a Special Projects photographer just disappeared,” he says. “They no longer had the budget to send me on these big assignments.” He became a staff photographer, and the people who hired him began leaving the paper as well. “I started doing more free-lance work on the outside,” he says. He remained a full-time employee of the *Post* for the time being, but soon met a woman named Barbara Sadick, who founded Matrix, a new photo agency that assigned photographers to news-based stories. The photo editor at the *Post* was very supportive, but Dickman found that holding down two jobs was “very intense.” After some exhausting travel between Denver and New York, he quit the newspaper and free-lanced fulltime.

### **Scaling New Heights**

Dickman had considered working for *National Geographic*, but thought that the long travel and time commitment on their assignments would take him away from his family too often. Then he was invited to the World Press Photographer’s 30th Anniversary celebration as a spokesperson at the International Center for Photography in New York. He and Becky attended a dinner at this event where they sat at the same table as Tom Kennedy, the director of photography at *Geographic*, who said that he’d love to have Dickman do some work for the magazine. He had gotten a taste of this in

1979, when Dickman and photographer Skeeter Hagler photographed a story about Peter Jenkins, the man who walked across the U.S. After Jenkins had shot his own pictures for the first half of the walk, *Geographic* assigned the two photographers to complete the story.

Several months after the dinner, *Geographic* gave Dickman his first assignment—shooting the Yellowstone fires in 1988—which opened the door for a long relationship with the magazine. Almost immediately thereafter, he was assigned to a story on Papua New Guinea, which involved living for three months in a village in a remote, stone-age rain forest. During this time, Becky was pregnant with their daughter and had the baby shortly after he came home. “She was always supportive,” he acknowledges, “but still, three months away from home is a long time.” Then Kennedy called him to cover the breakup of the Soviet Union, which was guaranteed to be a huge cover story. “He wasn’t really even asking me to do it; they were anointing me with this one.”

After talking it over with Becky, Dickman made the tough decision to call Kennedy back and turn the assignment down, thinking it might be the end of his relationship with the magazine. “He couldn’t believe it,” says Dickman. “But he wound up calling me back later, saying he really respected my decision.” He has continued working for them, and to date, he has photographed about 25 stories for *Geographic*, many of which are multiple week- or month-long assignments. “There’s been a lot of time spent and immersion working with these wonderful people,” Dickman muses. “But there is no one I like better working with than them.”

The year 2001 rolled around and the entire photo industry was impacted by the events of 9/11, when a lot of assignment photography was cut back.

“Magazines were reacting to the Internet boom as well,” Dickman points out, “and the reformation of the published piece.” Then in 2002, he was asked to contribute to *A Day in the Life of Africa*, and he traveled to Paris, France, where the book was headquartered. Olympus was the major sponsor of this project and the contributing photographers were asked to shoot with their new E-20 digital SLR.

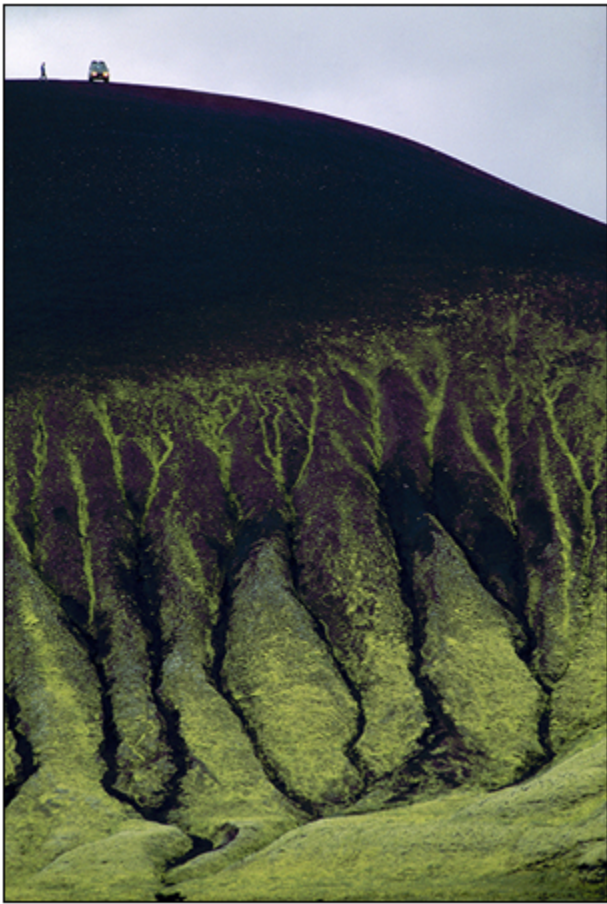
Dickman and several other Colorado photographers did some training with an Olympus tech person in Denver after the cameras were shipped. “We went to Paris and did a few more training sessions,” he says. “About 85–90% of these photographers said, ‘I don’t know if I’m going to give up my film camera.’ But about the same number of photographers came out of this photo shoot with the epiphany that digital imaging was the future.” He was impressed with Olympus because their design team from Tokyo was in Paris as well, actively seeking the pro’s input on the camera. Soon thereafter, Dickman was asked to participate in the Olympus Visionaries program, and is one of their sponsored photographers.



Pulitzer Prize-Winning Image from the War in El Salvador

### Sharing Knowledge

Dickman’s FirstLight workshop series began after some of his neighborhood friends started an arts foundation in Auvillar, France. Becky inquired as to whether they would like to have Dickman give a photographic workshop,



Black Sand Dune in Iceland with Green Lichen

and they were very receptive to the idea. He created a proposal for Olympus, who agreed to sponsor his workshops, and Dickman held his initial FirstLight Workshop in Auvillar, France in 2003. “We had 17 students and five instructors,” he says. “It was a photo boot camp—mayhem, but it was wonderful.” In the past, he says that some communities that hosted workshops have been somewhat frustrated with the results. All too often, photographers would step into their lives and photograph them without giving much in return. “Usually all they ask is that you send them prints, but photographers might do this less than 20% of the time.” Dickman decided that he wanted to create an entire document to send to the community, and to create a magazine of the students’ work. “First of all, we get the workshop attendees published,” he says. “These are people with a passion for photography on up to professionals; people working within the industry who wanted to hone their books.”

Dickman says they’ve been able to keep the number of workshop participants to instructors at about a 4-to-1 ratio. “Usually I’d bring Bert Fox, a former *National Geographic* photo editor, myself, another photographer preferably with knowledge of that particular area, and very quickly, I started bringing in Jay Kinghorn, my co-author of *Perfect Digital Photography*.” Kinghorn is an Adobe certified expert who teaches digital darkroom techniques and workflow. “With this workshop window of five days, you want to be shooting,” Dickman points out. “I decided to create assignments for our students, something I would want to photograph.” These assignments fit into the fabric of the community, like photographing life on a farm in France.

For the students, one of the most important parts of the workshop is being edited, Dickman points out. “I suggest that while students are waiting for their edit time, they should gather around the computer, because this is a very important instructive time in the workshop. They can go back out with that new, fresh knowledge and visual redirection and continue shooting.” He emphasizes that if one is taking more than two photographs, they’re dealing with a visual narrative and telling a story. “You’ve got to create a sense of place through environmental portraits,” he says. Dickman selects transitional communities as workshop locations; communities that are transitioning from being a small town to becoming a larger, more homogenized place. “Dubois, Wyoming is a perfect example of a little cowboy town in the Wind River Valley,” Dickman comments. Located about a mile outside the gates of Yellowstone, this small town is starting to grow.

FirstLight Workshops does a short run of magazines of the students’ work, and Bert Fox, the former *Geographic* photo editor, also does the layout and design. “We have it printed digitally,” Dickman points out, “and we send copies to those people who were gracious enough to let us step into their lives.” Additionally, he sends about 40–50 copies of the magazine to the town’s community center, as it can be an important document for the archives of that particular area. Students and workshop sponsors also get a copy of the publication. Generally, they create 4 – 6 large prints of each student’s work, says Dickman, which are displayed in local galleries in the communities they shoot in. FirstLight also invites the community to view the work. “We give people prints of themselves that are around 13x19 inches, while the students go home with 18x24 prints,” he says. Dubois really opened their doors to FirstLight workshops. They

didn't expect a large turnout at the 2006 gallery showing, but about 450 wound up attending—about half the town's population of 900. Hewlett Packard, Adobe and Olympus are major sponsors of the FirstLight Workshops. "Everyone has been amazingly supportive," he says.

### **The Passion Endures**

In addition to his workshop series, Dickman has been working with *Geographic* again in partnership with Lindblad Expeditions, one of the premier ocean travel companies who were the first to travel to the Antarctic. Their ship, the Endeavour, travels to various exotic locations, and Dickman is on board as the *Geographic* expert. "This ship is traveling year-round now, pole to pole, and they have a *Geographic* photographer aboard every sailing," he explains. "These photographers are available to provide information and shooting ideas, and can shoot stock images for themselves." Dickman has just completed two trips in the Antarctic on the Endeavour, and will take two trips to the Baja for whale migration. "This is a whole new part of my life that's opened up, and I can bring my wife and/or kids with me."



Yupik Hunter on the Yukon River

Dickman maintains that he still loves being a photographer. As much as he hates spending time away from home, his family understands that it's part of their familial dynamic, and they have the opportunity to travel with him from time to time. "Just when I think I'm sick of being away and would rather be working at McDonald's, I do my drill—which means picking up that camera and the magic flows through me. I can't believe I get to do this; it's unbelievable to be paid to be the eyes of a story."

See more of Jay Dickman's work at [www.jaydickman.net](http://www.jaydickman.net) and view his workshop schedule at [www.firstlightworkshops.com](http://www.firstlightworkshops.com).

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