

In Focus

Photographer Scott Gutentag tells stories of people with disabilities

By Laura Latzko
Pasadena Weekly Staff Writer

Often, people with disabilities don't have the opportunity to take professional photographs. Pasadena photographer and licensed educational psychologist Scott Gutentag seeks to change this. His work often highlights the lives and stories of those with physical and intellectual differences. Through his photography he hopes to inform others about a sector of the population that is often underrepresented or misunderstood.

Gutentag first took an interest in photography when he was 10 years old. He started his own photography business in 2015. He learned through a combination of classes, workshops and YouTube videos. Practicing and taking pictures in the field also helped him to develop as a photographer.

He started out focusing more on children and families but found there was a need for photographers who work with people with disabilities.

"There's a lot of people out there, especially adults with disabilities, who don't have images in their homes. I was able to make a connection with those who support them, to try to make their homes come alive and personalize them," Gutentag said.

Once he started working with this population, group home managers started reaching out to him to come and photograph their residents.

Gutentag is open to photographing any subject, but he does specialize in working with people with disabilities. These days, he tends to work with a variety of clients,



Photographer and licensed educational psychologist Scott Gutentag tells stories of people with disabilities through photography.

(Photo by Astonn Hart)

including families with children with disabilities, people in group homes and adults who live with their parents.

"I decided to offer that niche since it's difficult for families to find someone. Also for headshots, I've heard from those in the industry that they don't always feel really comfortable," Gutentag said.

He has photographed a number of people who have appeared on the TV show "Love on the Spectrum." They use the photos as headshots or for events such as conferences.

"That's been very special for me to see that oh, they're still using them," Gutentag said.

He said his background in psychology has helped him as a photographer. "I think getting into their world and reading not only their behavior but following their lead, that's really helped me in supporting them through the session."

He often will try to make it easier for his subjects by demonstrating poses or communicating with them in other ways. Sometimes, he works with subjects that are non-verbal, so he looks for cues from them.

"Communication is not always verbal. They show you through their body or their expressions," Gutentag explained.

He said when working with subjects, being respectful and presenting them in an

authentic way is important. To get people to look more natural, he may give them directions such as "Squeeze each other, laugh at each other, don't look at me or the camera, look at each other and laugh."

He also lets his subjects set the tone for the photo.

"Sometimes, people don't always want a serious, dramatic kind of look. They just want to have fun and joke around. Then, it turns into that kind of session," Gutentag said.

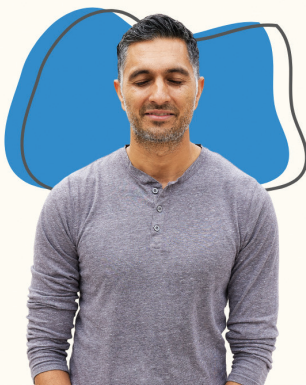
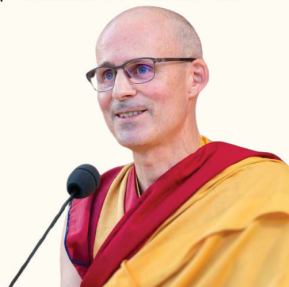
Often, subjects want to incorporate items that are meaningful to them, such as stuffed animals. One client really loved '80s music, so Gutentag had the whole family dance to an '80s song during the session.

Sometimes he will engage with people by showing them something they love, such as images of dogs or pictures from their favorite books. If they have specific requests, he will try to honor them to the best of his ability. This can mean photographing them in a certain location or in their favorite chairs.

"My job is to help them feel comfortable because it's not very comfortable standing in front of the camera. It's kind of artificial. So, I try to make it a pleasurable experience for anybody," Gutentag said.


He tries to get to know clients on a more personal level, which starts with an initial meeting. "I try to meet them ahead of time, so they feel comfortable with me. I get an idea of how to make a really comfortable session for them that is individualized and also to their preferences and their interests."

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He often tries to do sessions outside of homes, in spots such as gardens, and frequently captures photos of subjects and their family members. It's not uncommon for caregivers to help with the process, offering suggestions or advising when subjects are getting tired.

Gutentag said some subjects have had negative experiences in the past when they've gotten their pictures taken. So he tries to make it a positive experience, through break-out sessions and games that incorporate photography.

Some sessions are more challenging than others, such as when teens are fighting with their parents or when subjects get upset, walk away or cover their faces. In those instances, Gutentag will hit pause on the shoot.

"I don't force it. I give it a break, come back around and try to get some natural shots," Gutentag said.

Sometimes, family members reach out to him for his photos, often for memorial services.

"They're so happy they even have any photos, so their legacy can continue. It's really powerful," Gutentag said.

Along with private sessions, Gutentag also photographs events. He has done birthday parties, a quinceañera, an accessibility resource fair and a special needs prom. He also recently began teaching photography to people with disabilities. Students can bring any camera, whether it be the one on their phones or tablets or a handheld camera.

"The idea is how to create a photo, without all the bells and whistles, really create from an artistic standpoint," Gutentag said.

Recently, Gutentag has had the chance to share his process with others through film. A documentary short called "Disability in Focus," completed in September 2024, captures him at work.

"It's behind the scenes of what I do. There are five families. I connect with individuals with disabilities and tell their stories, and you hear a little bit more of their stories in the film as well," Gutentag said.

All of the families featured in the film are people Gutentag had worked with previously. The subjects represent a range of ages and disabilities, which Gutentag thought was important to show in the film. He worked with a crew that included director Allan Wasserman, a cinematogra-

pher, an assistant director, an editor and two musicians. Gutentag's girlfriend, who is an engineer, helped with lighting and technical elements. Shooting took place over one summer, and the film was completed in about a year.

While it was strange for him at first to be on camera, he said that he forgot about it when he started working with his subjects.

"The cinematographer just did a really great job at capturing things that I wasn't really thinking about," Gutentag said. "It's nice because it wasn't like I was acting in front of the camera. It was different at first. It felt a little weird and nerve-wracking. But then, I just went into my mode, and she captured what was there... It's always weird looking at yourself, at least for me, on video or camera. I've seen the film so many times, so I think I'm desensitized."

Since October, the film has been playing at film festivals, including those focused on disabilities and mental health.

"Disability in Focus" will be screened as part of the Believe Psychology Film Festival, taking place May 16-18, at The Cat's Crawl in Hollywood on Saturday, May 17, as part of "Block B: Authentic Acceptance." The event will also have a

mental health resource fair and art exhibit.

Gutentag said that he would be open to doing a limited series on his work.

"I've gotten some of that feedback actually from families and people in education that would be interested in seeing more," he said. "I'm not sure exactly what that'll look like, but I'm exploring next steps. With the story, I wanted to give a taste. Obviously, there's a lot more that could have been said, but I just want to introduce that idea."

More information on Scott Gutentag is available at scottgutentag.com. ■

Believe Psychology Film Festival: "Block B: Authentic Acceptance"

WHEN: 4-6 p.m. Saturday, May 17

WHERE: The Cat's Crawl, 660 N. Heliotrope Drive, Hollywood

PRICE: \$120 for VIP all-access pass, \$80 for VIP in-person and online screening pass, \$20 for Block B in-person screening, \$50 for online screening pass, \$50 for blocks A, B and C in-person screening pass.

INFO: believepsychologyfilmfest.com

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Sunday, April 13, 2025 English Masses:

8:00 AM (cantor and organ); 9:30 AM (Children's Choir)

12:30 PM Cappella Musica (Adult Choir)

5:00 PM Schola Cantorum (Adult Choir)

HOLY TUESDAY APRIL 15, 2025

Penance Service (Confessions)

7:15 PM (includes Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament)

HOLY WEDNESDAY, APRIL 16, 2025

Tenebrae Service, 7:30 PM

HOLY THURSDAY APRIL 17, 2025

8:15 AM Lauds for Thursday of Holy Week (Morning Prayer)

8:30 AM AND 3:00 PM Confessions

7:00 PM Mass of the Lord's Supper and
Procession of the Blessed Sacrament

GOOD FRIDAY APRIL 18, 2025

8:15 AM Lauds for Good Friday (Morning Prayer)

8:30 AM Confessions

12:00 PM Stations of the Cross

12:30 PM Seven Last Words Service

1:30 PM Celebration of the Passion of Our Lord

3:00 PM Procession with the image of the Dead Christ

5:30 PM Celebration of the Passion of Our Lord

HOLY SATURDAY APRIL 19, 2025

8:15 AM Lauds for Holy Saturday (Morning Prayer)

8:30 AM AND 3:00 PM Confessions

8:00 PM The Easter Vigil in the Holy Night

EASTER SUNDAY APRIL 20, 2025

English Masses: 8:00 AM (cantor, organ, and trumpet)

9:30 AM (Children's Choir) & brass quartet

12:30 PM Cappella Musica (Adult Choir) & brass quintet

5:00 PM Schola Cantorum (Adult Choir)

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