



COHESION & COMMUNITY

# Portraits of Compassion



by Victoria Thomas & Ashley Dowdy · December 6, 2023 · 5 mins read



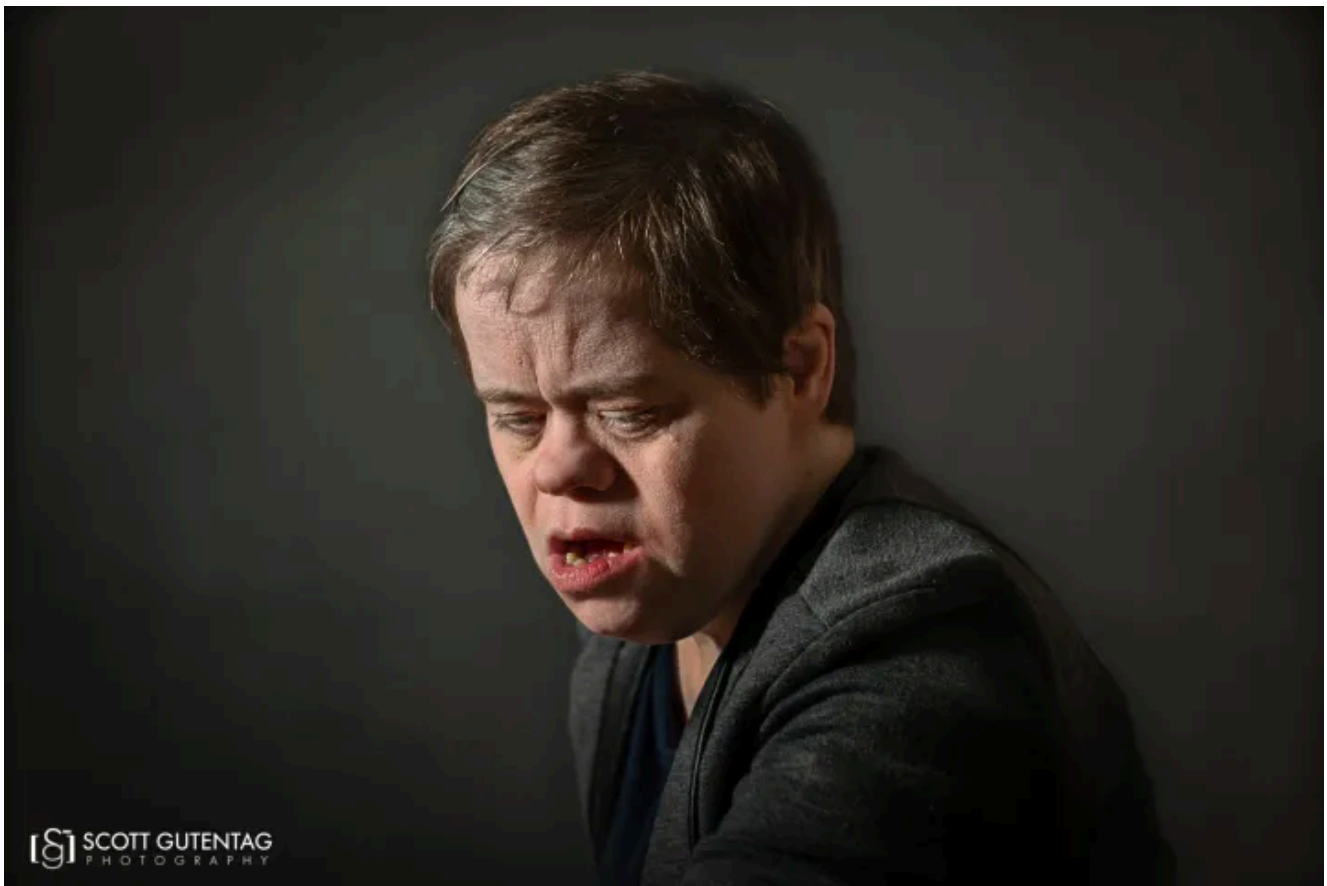
Belle's "Sweet Sixteen" celebration. Photo by Scott Gutentag

Pairing psychology with photography to create a legacy for the differently-abled.

**P**asadena resident and educational psychologist Scott Gutentag works with children with a range of disabilities.

“I have a Ph.D. in School and Clinical Child Psychology specializing in the assessment of and support for children with a range of disabilities, including autism, intellectual disability, physical challenges, and genetic syndromes. Along with a team of professionals, we assess and support students with the most challenging needs in special education in school districts throughout Southern California.”

Dealing with the most complex cases, Gutentag’s practice engages with students, families and teachers to provide a framework of activities that do more than improve basic function; he’s all about empowering and liberating the essential person, regardless of apparent physical, developmental, or behavioral challenges. These may include intellectual disabilities, Down Syndrome, and autism spectrum disorder.



Touching, feeling, and looking are how Mary explores and understands her environment.  
Photo: Scott Gutentag.

In addition to his clinical skills, Gutentag is a professional photographer specializing in telling stories and creating legacies for individuals with disabilities through the power of photography. He's often called upon to create heirloom-quality photographic portraits of the neurodivergent or otherwise atypical people he serves.

Gutentag's images capture unguarded moments of personal intimacy that may elicit a surprised gasp of self-recognition. Although the face or body of his subject may differ from our own – dating pairs with autism from the Netflix TV series, “Love on the Spectrum,” a family with a child experiencing multiple disabilities and a rare genetic syndrome, or older adults with the cognition of a young child and the communication skills of a child younger than age two, developmentally—we see ourselves in them, reflected at us through the artist's lens.



orge enjoys the outdoors and is a very chill and calm personality. Photo: Scott Gutentag

But Gutentag didn't come to his current role as an advocate/documentarian with a mission in mind; instead, his fluency with images developed naturally over time.

"I first became interested in photography when I was 10 years old and pushed the shutter button on my dad's all-manual 1957 Zeiss camera during one of our vacations. From then on, I was hooked. I was always quiet and content in observing my surroundings...seeing what tends to go unseen by others. I love capturing those images that evoke emotion and tell a story and are really cool—going beyond a snapshot. Ten years ago, I officially began my photography business and soon focused on individuals with disabilities. I combined my psychology knowledge with creative photography to offer equal access and opportunity to a population that tends to be misunderstood, ignored, or not seen."

Using a Sony digital camera and a new, portable lighting kit called Rotolight, he's now photographed approximately 100 individuals with some form of disability.

Gutentag's emotional and interpersonal literacy informs his approach when dealing with an individual with diverse and unique needs.



Carla with Scott Gutentag

"I like to meet with them ahead of time," he says, "and if they are more or less a person who stays inside their home, I find out what their favorite room is, so they'll be comfortable." As part of his preparation, he finds out what they enjoy doing, their strengths and challenges, what they relate to, and how much and what kind of interaction they prefer. Frequent breaks during the session help keep anxiety at bay, along with specific audible and tactile cues that help the individual relax while being photographed. Joking, talking about preferred interests, and listening all serve to engage the individual and help create a comfortable and individualized photo session. A favorite stuffed animal on the set can be a reassuring presence.

"Family photography can be an especially stressful time for families with children with disabilities and can lead to a different process of photography than those without disabilities," says Gutentag. "I find ways to support the experience and environment and positively engage the individual, given their profile. There has been a great increase in individuals entering the entertainment industry who need headshots, the number one part of their resume. A photo session can be a very uncomfortable process for anyone, especially those who love their routines and familiarity, need concrete and visual guidance movement built into their day, and their interests incorporated. By individualizing the session to their profile, I'm able to bring out their authentic, comfortable look," he says.

“Flexibility and reading the person is huge. I need to know what motivates the individuals so I can incorporate it into the session. Some clients don’t smile, look away, aren’t engaged, become frustrated, fall asleep, lose interest, or need more breaks than anticipated, so I go with the flow.”



“Love on the Spectrum” is a Netflix docuseries about people on the autism spectrum looking for love. Abbey’s story was very popular. Photo: Scott Gutentag.



Beth. Photo: Scott Gutentag

In the past few years, mainstream culture has begun to confront the inherent human fear of non-conforming people who may not look, talk, sound, act, or behave like us.

Unilever's Dove brand (the soap and bath products, not the ice cream) blazed a trail by featuring plus-size women, women with vitiligo, mastectomy scars, and missing limbs as their models in television ad campaigns. The glamorous Victoria's Secret brand included a gorgeous woman with Down syndrome in a massive print marketing campaign. [Little people](#) displaying dwarfism (like the dashing Peter Dinklage), individuals unable to hear (like the marvelous Marlee Matlin) and other differently-abled are increasingly present, not only in ads for products but in television series casting and programming as well.

This promising trend seems difficult to reconcile with our culture's obsession with Botox and Facetuning fillers and filters. And yet social media, so vilified in discussions of well-being, is not off-limits to individuals with disabilities.

Consider one of Gutentag's subjects, Abbey @hatsbyabbey, a regular on "Love on the Spectrum." Her obvious intelligence, easy laugh, radiant skin, dazzling smile, and crystal-blue eyes are camera-ready, and high-energy TikTok posts garner an astronomical following. Unless someone tells you, you may not realize that she experiences autism. Listen to her sing along with Ariel in the remake of "The Little Mermaid," and you will understand: Just as Ariel yearns to walk, run, and spend all day in the sun, Abbey wants to be accepted by ordinary typicals, "part of your world."

Gutentag's work is the subject of a forthcoming documentary called "Disability in Focus," which will soon be entered into national film festivals. The artist cites his recently deceased father, Phil, an M.D. specializing in internal medicine, as an enduring source of inspiration. His father's mantras have become his own, including: "We're all just skin and bones," "Never give up," and "Try your best."

He adds, "I love telling people's stories and helping to create their legacies. I always ask people and families, 'How do you want to be introduced to future generations, many of whom you'll never meet?' I met my grandfather's family

in a 1905 family picture, and I learned a lot based on how everyone came across in their image.”



Roxanne leans her head gently against her sister. She loves her family and was excited to have photos with her family. Photo: Scott Gutentag.

### **For more information**

Misconceptions and stereotypes about people with disabilities persist in society. By better understanding their experiences, we can challenge these preconceived notions and promote a more accurate and positive perception of their abilities and potential.

Luckily for those seeking guidance and knowledge on disabilities or disability advocacy, many resources are available in our community. Gutentag recognizes several organizations that have proven instrumental in his work. These include the [American Association on Intellectual and Developmental](#)

[Disabilities](#), the [Autism Society](#), and [Children and Adults with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder \(CHADD\)](#).

Parents of children with disabilities also face difficulties. Some children may be excluded from peer-related events due to perceived safety concerns or a lack of accommodation. Parents can rest more easily, knowing that many local schools provide equality and access to children with disabilities. Schools such as the [Pasadena Unified School District](#) offer classes to those with disabilities and online resources for parents seeking more insight into their child's needs.

The short URL of this article is: <https://localnewspasadena.com/t2ct>



**Victoria Thomas & Ashley Dowdy**

## 1 COMMENT

**Nancy Gronroos**

December 19, 2023 at 9:34 pm

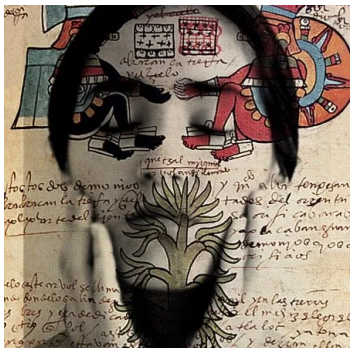
Thank you for this heart warming story, and thanks to Scott Gutentag for inviting us to look beyond differences to our shared need for love and respect.

Loading...

*Comments are closed.*

---

## YOU MIGHT BE INTERESTED IN



April 16, 2025

**Women of the Lens  
Celebrated at PAC  
LA**



May 22, 2023

**Naturalists BioBlitz  
Nearby Wildlife  
Sanctuary**

---

## LATEST FROM COHESION & COMMUNITY

### **Eye of the Beholder**

It's been a long road getting from there to here.

### **The Secret Life of Stuff**

Our troubles are not in our stuff, but in ourselves.

### **Eaton Fire Collaborative Goes Public at the Rose Bowl**

New community organization trying to unite efforts for recovery and rebuilding.

### **Prom On, With Dignity**

Alice's Kids nonprofit underwrites Pasadena High Schools' Prom Night.

### **Silent Sundays**

Janet Grey's haunting images of Altadena's chimneys revealed by the Eaton Fire.

## NEWSLETTER SIGN-UP

You may opt out at any time, and we will never share your information with anyone...ever!

First name or full name

Email

☐ By continuing, you accept the privacy policy

**SUBSCRIBE**

# LOCAL NEWS Pasadena

COPYRIGHT © PASADENA MEDIA FOUNDATION 2025, ALL RIGHTS RESERVED  
Local News Pasadena is a publication of the Pasadena Media Foundation, a 501(c)3 tax-exempt journalism nonprofit.

[PRIVACY POLICY](#) [LOGOUT](#) [NEWSLETTER ARCHIVE](#)  
[ABOUT](#) [CONTACT US](#)

**LOCAL NEWS PASADENA IS MADE POSSIBLE BY READERS LIKE YOU AND:**



PEN America



Los Angeles Press Club



Pasadena Media Foundation



California Association of Realtors



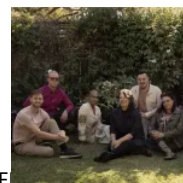
Los Angeles County Department of Economic Opportunity



Institute for Nonprofit News

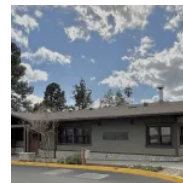
Institute for Nonprofit News

## RANDOM READS



**A Smørrebrød of Nordic Music, Re-imagined**

January 23, 2025



**The Poetry Gathering at Washington Park**

March 14, 2025



**Prom On, With Dignity**

March 17, 2025



**Pasadena NAACP Branch Participates in Eaton Fire Town Hall**

