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Gardner-Webb Alum Teaches Photography Skills to Women & Children in Poverty-Stricken Nations

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Office of University Communications

August 23, 2013

Kate Gazaway ('08) Inspires Hope and Creativity through Picture Change Organization

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C. – The joy captured on the little girl's face in the photograph is contagious, and upon viewing her immediate surroundings, the resulting juxtaposition is difficult to process. The child, though dirt-smudged and surrounded by the squalor of a trash heap, radiates laughter and a spirit of gladness that is somewhat difficult to comprehend.

Gardner-Webb alum Kate Gazaway ('08) did not take the photo, but she is responsible for the images captured. Gazaway is the founder of a non-profit organization known simply as "Picture Change," which teaches basic photography skills and provides donated equipment to impoverished people (mostly women and children) in under-developed countries including Nicaragua and India. A former student of Gazaway's, Nicaraguan translator Rosa, snapped the shot of the laughing child in the dump. "I am in awe and sometimes shock as I look through Rosa's stunning work," Gazaway shared. "This photo of a girl named Velma who we met while in Limonal (a landfill village outside the city of Chinandega) is particularly striking."

Gazaway said that Rosa has developed a relationship with Velma's family and others in the village and has taken many beautiful photos over the past two years. "Rosa is Nicaraguan just like they are and the interactions and culture she captures are simply magnificent," she explained. "I couldn't be more proud of or humbled to know Rosa and see the impact she is having on her community and the world with her photography. She is changing the perspective on people in poverty: to not just see poverty, but to see people. And that is the point of Picture Change."

Picture Change is a non-profit organization developed by Gazaway in 2011 with the goal of inspiring women and children to discover self-confidence, innate creativity, and their ability to create change in their community through photography. "Our motto is, 'You are important because you exist, and you are not defined by your circumstances,'" she reflected. Many of her students have endured hardships and trials from which recovering would be difficult. Yet, by offering them a different way to view their communities—and themselves—her students discover that they too have a gift they can share.

Gazaway's own journey toward photography held many twists and turns, and after spending two years studying journalism and interpersonal communication, she arrived at Gardner-Webb and began to focus on photography. Under the leadership of Dr. Bob Carey, an award-winning photographer and chair of the GWU Communication Studies department, she said she began to understand the vast career opportunities within the realm of creative photos. Following two international trips in which she further explored photojournalism, a new idea began to take shape. That's when she established Picture Change.

"After visiting an Indian orphanage, I realized that I hated taking pictures and leaving," she shared. "I wanted to stay and offer more of a lasting impact." In 2009, she began teaching basic photography skills in countries where most of her students had never seen their own photograph, let alone been trusted with an expensive camera. Immediately, Gazaway began to see a new kind of hope emerge within her students.

"One of my students, Mongola, was tricked and then trapped in a brothel in India for years," Gazaway said. "Many others have similar stories. Because they don't know how to read or write, photography becomes a wonderful form of expression and creativity for them."

People have asked whether Gazaway is concerned that the expensive photography equipment might be stolen, since many of the individuals involved in her program are below the poverty line. Although many are living in extremely difficult economic conditions, she has never had a problem with cameras disappearing. "None of them have held a camera before, so they are extremely careful," she reflected. "They take this gift of a camera as more than just a camera, but that I'm trusting them with something valuable and they are going to do the best they can with it. So it's more than just photography; it's a trust thing."

With a desire to teach her students that they matter and they each have something special to contribute, Gazaway emphasizes community service. "We have a community 'give-back' day in which we show students how they can use their gifts to give back to their communities," she said. "We locate a gallery where students can exhibit their work. And we want them to continue to use photography to benefit the towns and villages in which they live, long after we leave."

Although she is not yet 30 years old, Gazaway has learned at least one lifelong lesson. "I know now not to be timid with my gift," she offered. "I'm not claiming to be the best teacher or the best photographer because I know I'm not. But just because you're not the best at something doesn't mean you shouldn't share it. Everyone has a gift they can share."

Gazaway is available to speak to groups and organizations about Picture Change. For additional information, visit picture-change.org or email info@picture-change.org.

Located in Boiling Springs, N.C., Gardner-Webb University seeks a higher ground in higher education – one that embraces faith and intellectual freedom, and inspires in students a love of learning, service, and leadership.