



SILENT IMAGES:

Pictures worth one thousand verbs

Written by Katie Toussaint.
Photos by Silent Images.

In the amount of time it typically takes to watch one film, you could watch seven. Turn out the lights, sink into your couch and kick back with your computer, or even your iPhone. Turn up the volume. Soak up some images:

- A hand holds a cigarette, smoke streaming.
- Two hands hold a sign, steady.
- A young man in a sweatshirt gazes to the side, in the distance.
- There is music.

Take the images in, but don't get too comfortable. The hand with the cigarette belongs to Donald. He first went to prison in 1974 for armed robbery, assault with a deadly weapon and attempted murder. He has struggled to smoothly re-enter the community after release from prison. The two hands holding the sign are clinging to cardboard. The sign reads: "homeless." Wynnton is the young man. He dropped out of high school to support his mom and ended up in prison. There, he wrote a song. He recites: "It's us against the world and I ain't laying it down / so keep throwin' curve balls / I'll knock them back to the mound."

The images in each video roll for about 10 minutes. Maybe they make you sink deeper into your couch. Maybe they mobilize you. *Get Off Our Donkey: A Documentary Series to Fight Injustice in Charlotte* does not offer fairy tales. It presents an angle derived from "The Parable of the Good Samaritan," where a man gets down from his donkey to

aid a neighbor, putting that neighbor on his own donkey.

Created by the staff of **Silent Images**—David Johnson, Lydia Walker and Hunter Buchanan along with a select team of photographers—the not-so-silent seven stories unfold every day under and beyond the Charlotte skyline. These are the stories of prisoners, abortions, human trafficking, refugees, homelessness, high school dropouts and the elderly. Johnson said these topics were the least talked about or the most misunderstood in this city.

The first storyteller

"One of our taglines is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable," Johnson said. He spoke through a screen set up in Myanmar after the popping sounds of a Skype connection dissipated and his face materialized. The founder of Silent Images, a nonprofit that offers professional photography and video services to charities to inspire and educate viewers, sat in a yellow-lit room abroad at the end of April. It was about midnight his time, but he launched into an animated description of his work with the Kansas-based DeBoer Foundation to train the people of Myanmar in photography and video.

"They decided to vest in young entrepreneurs who want to start nonprofits and start small businesses," he said. "So my role with them is helping them get their website built, raise money, tell their story."

When the former English teacher and tennis coach stepped away from eight years at Providence Day School, he was looking to tell stories of hope in circumstances of

injustice and his camera was angled toward subjects abroad. He was a writer and a photographer who had already spent his share of time away from America.

"Every summer I was overseas doing a variety of different work and just began to see there was a huge gap for nonprofits and charities who need help storytelling," Johnson said. He started working with Silent Images in 2006.

The organization has since served more than 300 nonprofits globally, mobilizing photographers to serve charities and churches at low costs or without cost, educating communities about issues through mediums like photography and lecture and donating profits from photography and book sales back to those documented by the staff and affiliated photographers. Although Silent Images has delved into topics abroad including genocide in Darfur and human trafficking in Cambodia, Johnson said inspiration to serve does not require that element of intrigue that faraway places often offer.

Familiar focus

Johnson switched to a more Charlotte-centric focus about two years ago when he started a family and started to notice that attention on international issues can create a disconnect in what is happening right here at home. His take on those who only serve internationally: "It's a lot more exciting sometimes and it may even look better to do that but they miss the doorstep."

Silent Images, which now splits its focus between domestic and international issues, wanted to give the community

something that could be used right here: the Donkey Series. "It's supposed to be a dose of reality that leads people to compassion," Walker said. To invoke that compassion, they now operate with less silence than the photography Silent Images was founded on, using about 80 percent video, 20 percent still photography.

Johnson said videography, an expensive medium to produce well, is the main staple for most nonprofits' storytelling. Many nonprofits can't afford the video production side of publicity but a loyal donor base helps support Silent Images' production.

The Donkey Series lifted off with a grant and the filming started in January 2013, with final edits completed in August. Carmel Baptist Church hosted the premiere party for the series in October 2013, with a sold-out crowd of more than 1,200 viewers. Walker was working in Africa when Johnson emailed her with an update about the capacity of the premiere audience. "That was a great moment and a huge encouragement and a huge blessing," she said. At the time, she thought: "We are going to see some change here."

Meanwhile

The series has been undergoing edits to fit a nationalized version reaching other urban areas. Johnson is back in Charlotte and Buchanan has spent the month of May working with nonprofits in Thailand. Walker will spend September in Israel focusing on churches and youth development programs, helping build a creative team and storytelling skills. For the fourth summer, Silent Images will teach photography to about 100



homeless children in partnership with A Child's Place. The nonprofit will continue to serve several charities each month.

No matter who the team is working with, or what the topic is, Johnson said, "The beauty of the story always comes out in the people. It doesn't matter where they

are." But the Donkey Series shows that it matters what you do here—while you are here. "Ninety percent of these interviews were filmed within 10 miles of your front doorstep," he said. "So you can't ignore it anymore." ■

get involved

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A few answers from the series

Solutions are presented at the end of each video in the *Get Off Your Donkey* (GOOD) series. Viewers are directed to take action through a slew of options like volunteering and donating with—and to—specific groups in the area. They can even donate to the GOOD Fund to support the specific charities featured, share the film series at a gathering or incorporate the GOOD curriculum into schools. Regardless of the solution, most of the possibilities came straight from the featured charities. "They know the answers," Johnson said. "They can direct us."

• **Prisoners:** "What sometimes I think we don't do so well is to work with people who have been oppressed, people who have been ostracized from society to bring them in, and say: 'You know what? You have strengths, you have value, and we're going to work together to create a community.' And that's the paradigm shift that I think we need to make in Charlotte around all these issues. Around re-entry, around homelessness, around affordable housing." —Melissa Mummert, program director at **Second Helping**

• **Homelessness:** "At any one night in Charlotte there are between five and seven thousand people who are living in shelters or living on the street ... what I've learned is behind every one of those numbers is a person with a face and a name and a story. Homelessness is not who they are, it's a situation of what they are in right now. So you need to look beyond the situation and find the person." —Annabelle Suddreth, executive director at **A Child's Place**

• **High School Dropouts:** "There are many, many barriers that prevent them from achieving their personal goals ... We want the city to know that these young people are doing what they have to do to survive, to take care of their families." —Stephan Askew, founder and CEO of **Q Foundation, Inc.**