

Project Outcome Report

Returning to Woodberry: A Photographic Exploration

I grew up at Woodberry Forest School, an all-male boarding high school tucked away in rural Madison County, Virginia. In addition to living on campus from the age of four, I became the only female student there for my final three years of high school. For my 3rd year grant project, I was interested in returning to Woodberry to explore, for a year, its unique culture through photography. Woodberry is no longer the same school I've known since I was a child—the headmaster has stepped down after over fifteen years of leadership and development and has been replaced by someone new, my younger brother graduated (and with him the last students I knew personally), and my parents are in the process of leaving Woodberry to begin new lives in Charlottesville. I saw this as the last time I would have such unusual inside access to what I know is a fascinating world of its own—a tiny community of teachers, staff, and four hundred teenage boys.

Originally, I was interested in photographing *all* aspects of the Woodberry community, from students to faculty to staff. I wanted to focus on taking portraits of all these characters I knew existed. However, the first couple times I returned to Woodberry to photograph, I shied away from people and took roll after roll of places and details that might go unnoticed but that are distinctly Woodberry. I thought I might move away from photographing the people, since I was finding it so incredibly difficult and uncomfortable to approach students and explain the project and ask if I could take their pictures. In the photos I was taking, I noticed a bit of a theme coming through. Woodberry is always concerned with being on the cutting edge of technology and education, yet the school is also steeped in tradition and is quite slow to change its ways (and its décor and appearance). I began noticing this tension (between old and new, tradition and technology) in many areas around Woodberry, so I decided to make that tension the focus on my project.

Throughout the course of the spring semester, I met with my project advisor, Dave Woody. He was my Photo I teacher and was hugely influential and inspiring to me in that class. I showed him the latest pictures I had taken, and he had plenty of comments and critiques about the direction of my project. At one point, when I was shooting at Woodberry on one of the first days of spring, I wandered down to the river and started taking pictures of forts that the students put up. I showed these pictures to Dave, and we agreed that this should be my focus. From then on, I returned to Woodberry as much as possible to capture what I call the “river culture” of the school. The Rapidan river borders Woodberry, and boys have access to it throughout the school year for swimming, fishing, and hanging out. For as long as I can remember, groups of friends have staked out territories along the river and put up forts made out of lumber and tarps. The forts range in elaborateness, but all include at least a fire pit, some chairs, and access to the water. Some of the more complex forts have platforms, covered shelters, rope swings, grills, and coolers. At first I was walking up and down the trail photographing run-down forts that had been abandoned, but eventually worked up enough courage to approach and photograph boys spending time at their forts and talk to them about the importance of the space and the river, which provides an opportunity for the boys to temporarily escape the rigor and stress of school life.

It took me a while to realize how broad and vague my original project idea was, and I did struggle for a few weeks with the photos I was taking and the stress of trying to approach people to take portraits. However, once I settled on a much more specific theme and place (the river), I was able to take much stronger pictures. I returned to Woodberry and took about twenty rolls of film in the spring semester. I have many pictures to work with but I don't feel this project is over. There are many more pictures to be taken. While this is technically an outcome report, I think it's more appropriate to consider it a progress report. This project is not over for me. I'd like to continue to return to Woodberry and take pictures of the river culture until I feel I have enough material for a book. In my photography class last semester, I learned about photo books and how to make a hand-sewn hardcover book, as well as how to make a book with Blurb. I'd like this photo project to culminate in a book, either an edition I make by hand or create with Blurb. I want the contents of the book to reveal the unique culture of the river as a source of comfort and place of significance for the students.

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Ava Lonergan

Selection of Images

Additional images from the early stages of the project can be found on my portfolio website:
avalonart.portfoliobox.me

Image 1



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Image 2



Arts Scholars 3rd Year Arts Award
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Image 3



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Image 4



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Image 5



Image 6



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Image 7

