

Photographer Steven Laxton Captures the People of Cypress Hills



Photo by Steven Laxton

Brooklyn Life

East New York

Oct 4, 2016 • 09:00am

by Susan De Vries

A move to Cypress Hills and a warm welcome from his neighbors inspired award-winning photographer Steven Laxton to take up his camera and capture the faces of his new community. Originally from Australia, Laxton took up photography as a teenager. Since his move to New York in 2002, he has continued a focus on portraiture and photo essays. His work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Elle* and *Philadelphia Magazine*. Past subjects have included Holocaust survivors for an exhibit at the Musee de l'Elysee and traveling circus performers of El Salvador for his project 'Circo El Salvador.'

After moving to Cypress Hills this summer, Laxton began visiting nearby Highland Park with a mobile studio to meet community members and celebrate the spirit of the neighborhood. So far he has snapped about 30 portraits in the park, which straddles Brooklyn and Queens. He set up an @cypresshillsbrooklyn Instagram feed to share his pictures and we were immediately drawn to the powerful portraits.

Brownstoner recently had the opportunity to talk to Laxton about the project and the inspiration he draws from the people of Cypress Hills:

Brownstoner: How did you end up in Cypress Hills?

Steven Laxton: I was looking to buy a place and had looked at other areas. I discovered a house out here and fell in love with the neighborhood. I'd never been to Cypress Hills before, but once I visited I focused my search. I found the parks, architecture, people beautiful.



What inspired you to start this project?



I thought about it as soon as I moved in, but I probably started real work about two months after moving. I was inspired by all the people I met, it is one of those truly diverse neighborhoods.

On my small block there are 12 houses but 10 different nationalities represented. So much in New York can change quickly that I thought it was worth celebrating what this neighborhood looks like now. I would walk through the park and see this diversity — Dominican, Yemeni, Guyanese, Mexican, Chinese.

As you walk through the park you see so many people using it together and I thought it would be nice to celebrate that.

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As a new resident of the community has the project helped you meet your neighbors?

Yes and no. I met my neighbors within the first week as everyone reached out and welcomed me. I didn't know what to expect and I felt I was lucky to find such a warm, inclusive neighborhood.

But [I also meet people] walking out and photographing the community. It is interesting to talk to people while photographing them.

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How do you choose the people you photograph in Highland Park?

Since I want to show the diversity of the neighborhood I try to represent that by photographing people in the park. For example in the park are a basketball court, soccer field and picnic area filled with different groups doing these different activities. I try to move around to the different areas of the park and invite them to be photographed. Most people are quite willing.

What kind of studio setup do you bring with you to the park?

Pretty basic, just a background and a light modifier. I try to keep it compact as I am moving around in the park. I don't want to intimidate anyone.

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How often do you shoot for the project?

It is a personal project so I fit it in around commissions. When I have a free day I will spend a few hours taking portraits.

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Are you finding that as word has spread in the neighborhood more people are more willing to have their portraits taken?

I haven't noticed that, but it is possible, particularly on the basketball court. As soon as one person said yes then others would agree.

Most people are in the park just doing their thing and are surprised to be asked but excited to be photographed.

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Do people receive a copy of their portraits?

I send them all a copy of the portrait and I have the Instagram, which I invite them all to join. And I generally show them examples from the Instagram before the shoot so that they know and understand what I am doing

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What led to your decision to present these images, all shot in the park, as portraits on a white background?

What struck me after moving to this area was the people. By putting them on a white background it is making them the focus. It is also democratizing to have them all on a white background.

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What are your plans for the project?

At the moment this is just about celebrating the people in this special place. I'd love for it to be shown within the community somewhere. But at the moment it is a personal project to celebrate what is here.

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