



Axle Contemporary's photographers chose to keep the subjects of the portraits anonymous so that participants would feel free to join in and express themselves.

MOVING PICTURES

On a photographic road trip around the Navajo Nation in an old delivery truck, two artists document the spirit of the place—with help from its people.

BY *ANDREW ROUSH*
PHOTOS BY *JERRY WELLMAN &
MATTHEW CHASE-DANIEL*



THE OLD MAN was ambling through the throng of the Navajo Nation Fair in Window Rock, Arizona, last fall when he caught a glimpse of a 1970 step van—an erstwhile Wonder Bread delivery truck—parked among the thicket of artist stalls and vendor booths. A week of dances, rodeos, and fry bread contests, the fair is what Navajo Nation Museum director Manuelito Wheeler calls a “beautiful example of organized chaos.” In the midst of it, the man wondered what to make of this aluminum anomaly. He approached the truck’s owners, Matthew Chase-Daniel and Jerry Wellman, a pair of Santa Fe artists, and asked just what this was all about. When they explained that they were taking portraits and offering prints to the subjects, the man asked a question the photographers encountered time and again: How much does it cost? It’s free, they answered. The man sat for a portrait and grew enamored. He asked where they were taking the truck next. In a few days they would be in Chinle, Arizona, about 70 miles away. On that day, the man arrived at the Tséyi’ Shopping Center, his family in tow.

At Wheeler’s invitation, Chase-Daniel and Wellman photographed everyday people from across the five agencies, 110 chapters, and 27,425 square miles of New Mexico, Arizona, and Utah that make up the Navajo—or Diné—Nation. Their van is Axle Contemporary, a pint-size art gallery and photography studio on wheels. Inside, the beauty: wooden benches and natural light. Outside, the beast: a factory-gray delivery truck that previously belonged to a Colorado Springs Elvis impersonator. For two weeks, the gallery streaked along the bones of Route 66 and down winding roads in the region known locally as Dinétah. They parked at fairs and churches and in front of dives, diners, and a Walmart—15 places in all. Participants got a copy of their picture on the spot, thanks to a solar-powered printer.

Wheeler thought it was a perfect way to capture a snapshot of Navajo country, with the help of its people.

“It feels good to have a seat at the table of representation,” he says of the project. “You see all different expressions of pride, happiness, determination, and spontaneity.”

In Farmington, a woman in her seventies stepped into the truck, sat on the plain wooden stool, and announced, “The last good photo of me was taken when I was 20.” Fifty years later, she was ready to have her portrait taken and printed in about the time it takes the fog to clear from a Polaroid. Chase-Daniel admits that alleviating half a century of anticipation was a daunting prospect, but they suc-

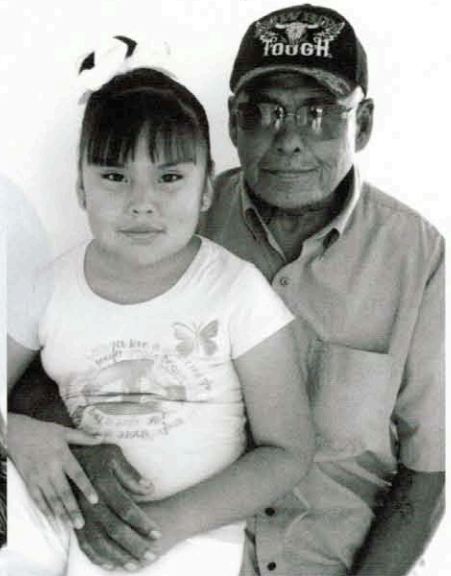


ceeded. Their subject was satisfied, and walked away with an image of herself to last another 50 years.

“We got a taste of some very different places,” Wellman says. And a huge range of people, Chase-Daniel adds.

They photographed children with rabbits and chickens at the Bi-County Fair in Prewitt, a tiny town between Grants and Gallup, and people holding their diplomas at San Juan College in Farmington. At the Bethel Reformed Christian Church in Shiprock, a goateed man in a Pittsburgh Steelers hat and jersey proudly displayed another Steelers jersey. Another, clad in a woodland camouflage shirt and matching boonie hat, held a bolt-action hunting rifle. Painters held their brushes, waitresses their notepads. A boy with a gap-toothed grin showed off his newly acquired pet turtle. Many simply held their water bottles, their phones, their children and siblings. In the crossroads city of Gallup, Navajo teachers, students, and artists lined up along with long-haul truckers from India, the descendants of Italian coal miners, and Filipino hospital workers.

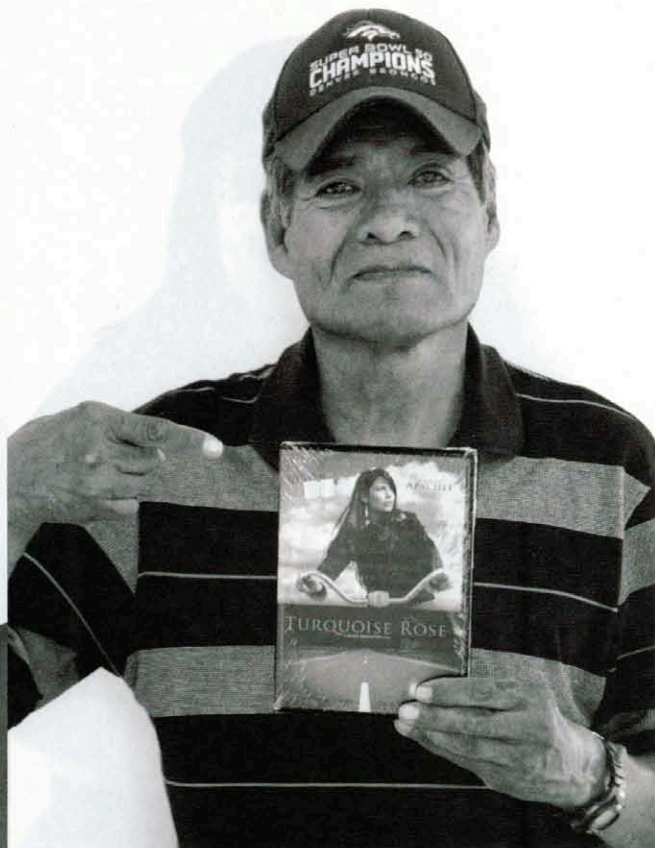
Today, those photos hang on walls and above mantels all across the reservation and beyond. Wellman’s eyes broaden and he smiles at the results, which demanded communal participation. “They also saw it as an art project,” he says of the subjects. “They got



People from Zuni to Gallup, Window Rock, and beyond all sat for portraits, giving a broad view of Dinétah. Each held an item of their choice. *Facing page:* Matthew Chase-Daniel (left) and Jerry Wellman.



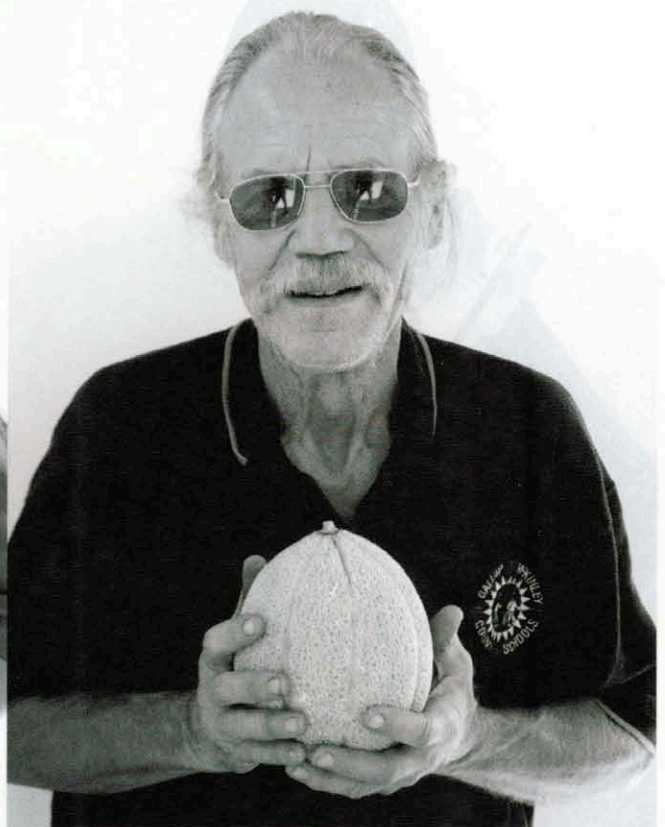
Items that participants posed with—some mundane, others profound—ranged from a hoe picked up at a flea market (*above*) to a DVD of a locally shot film (*facing page, top right*) to weavings (*facing page, bottom*).



"You see all different expressions of pride, happiness, determination, and spontaneity."

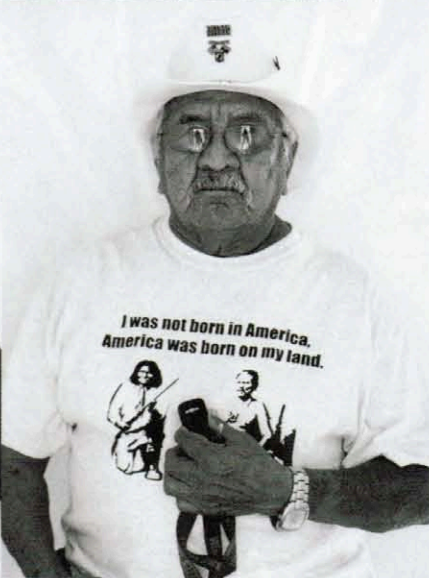
—*Manuelito Wheeler,*
director of the Navajo Nation Museum







Chase-Daniel and Wellman were impressed by the overlapping layers of life they saw, including the non-Native people who live in and around Navajo country.



Many posed with children and siblings or displayed symbols of their heritage. Each photo in the book was merged into a composite portrait (facing page), which also serves as its cover.

it just as much as we did. The people, the art, and us—we all worked together to make the same thing.”

The museum exhibit, plus a black-and-white photo book, *E Pluribus Unum: Diné'tah* (Axle Contemporary, 2016), are capstones of the project. The book catalogs more than 800 subjects picked from 3,000-plus photos. On the cover, a soft, unfocused face looks back at you—the digitally averaged face of each picture in the book. The portraits are merged together, blended into one blurry, smiling image of early-21st-century Diné.

The idea of a gallery on wheels could sound gimmicky in an age of trendy food trucks and pop-up shops, but Chase-Daniel and Wellman are in it for the long haul. Since their meager investment in 2010, Axle Contemporary has showcased more than 300 New Mexico artists. The *E Pluribus Unum* project got its start in Santa Fe in 2012 and was repeated two years later in Albuquerque.

“Any way to engage the public in art is good,” Wellman says, “whatever that might be.” Even in the crowded confines of a 40-year-old step van.

When Wheeler called on them to bring the show to Indian Country, the intent was to generate true representations of individuals and their communities. These are not history textbook images of Native Americans, the “vanishing race” portraits that make up so much of America’s collective image of its first peoples, thanks largely to the staid and staged portraits of Edward Curtis a century ago. These photos are informal and participatory.

“It wasn’t just a couple of white guys out from Santa Fe to take pictures of the Indians,” Chase-Daniel says.

“We’re breaking down stereotypes,” says Wellman, showing “who we are as people and as members of a larger society.”

Their photos, by turns funny, striking, and moving, bear this out. Two full-page photos, side by side in the book, feature women at the Toadlena Trading Post. On one side, the bespectacled subject holds a traditional Two Grey Hills rug. On the other, the subject in shades and a backward ball cap shows off a Bruce Lee DVD. Both women had just picked up their new treasures at the trading post when they saw the truck parked outside.

“This bread truck cruised around, creating this experience that we are really the same, with beautiful differences,” Wheeler writes in the book’s foreword. “That’s the power of art.” ■

Andrew Roush is the magazine’s senior editor.



Go. See. Do.

MAKE THE TRIP Visit the exhibit at the Navajo Nation Museum, just across the state line in Window Rock, Arizona, from June through the end of the year. (928) 871-7942; navajonationmuseum.org

PAGE THROUGH Purchase a copy of *E Pluribus Unum: Diné'tah* online. axleart.com

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