

Local photographer works to document forgotten lives

By Anna Katherine Clemmons/ Correspondent

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For the past couple of weeks, the news has been filled with photographs of Louisiana residents left homeless by Hurricane Katrina. Poor citizens and victims of the Iraq war and the fighting in Afghanistan are also often pictured in the news, drawing attention to United States' involvement in the conflicts in the Middle East.

While focus on these issues is important, many victims of conflict around the world are ignored in daily news reports and photographs.

One local freelance photographer is working to change that.

Brookline's Rania Matar calls the Palestinian inhabitants of refugee camps in Lebanon "a forgotten people," ignored by politicians and the citizens of Lebanon who live alongside them.

"With all that's going on in the Middle East, it's the big, white elephant in the room that no one wants to deal with," said Matar, 41, of the estimated 360,000 residents of the refugee camps. "I just want to bring humanity back to these people through my photos."

Though she was born in Lebanon, Matar has been a U.S. resident for more than 20 years. She lived in Beirut with her family until 1984, when political unrest reached a boiling point.

"A lot of people left then because things were very bad," Matar said. "The American Embassy next to my school was bombed and the war came so close."

Matar decided to leave, and transferred her architectural studies to Cornell University.

Visa won

After graduating from Cornell, Matar obtained a one-year work visa and moved to the Boston area. She relocated with her now-husband, who is also Lebanese, and studied at Columbia University.

Initially, Matar planned to return to Lebanon after a few years in the United States, but once she and her husband began working and started a family, they stayed.

Matar began taking night classes at the New England School of Photography in 1994 while pregnant with her twins.

"I did [photography] as a fun thing originally, to take pictures of my kids," Matar said of her four children. "But one thing led to another, and now it's full time."

Her work focusing on Palestinian refugees began in 2002. Matar accompanied her cousin, who was filming a documentary on the 20th anniversary of the Beirut massacres, on a trip to Lebanon.

"I went with her and was appalled that this was four minutes from where I had grown up and that I'd never seen this - people lived so terribly," Matar said.

Walking among the refugees, Matar worked to build enough trust to take their photos.

"I had a hard time doing it in the beginning," Matar said. "I looked too much like I didn't belong there and everything was so shocking."

However, with each return trip, she became more familiar and learned to focus on her art with a detached eye.

"Over the years, I've learned what to expect, so I don't get shocked or emotional about it. It's hard to ignore people's misery, but it's good to be objective," Matar said. "Gradually I've built up relationships with the people, and the fact that I know the language helps."

Women, children 1st

Her photographs portray mostly women and children because men are either working or more hesitant to have their photographs taken. This summer, Matar spent five weeks in Beirut on a new project, which will be developed this fall.

Moving beyond the street corners, she went inside refugees' homes, focusing her documentary-style prints on intimate portraits of the daily lives of housewives and their families.

In the current Allston Public Library exhibit, on display through Oct. 31, Matar has close to 45 prints from three years of Lebanon visits. Entitled "The Forgotten Population," the powerful documentary-style photographs are black and white, showing various scenes including an elderly refugee couple sitting on a dirty street corner or a baby lying beneath a line of drying laundry.

Despite the emotions they invoke, Matar is quick to point out that her photos aren't meant as a political statement.

"I don't want them to be seen in the activist context," Matar said. "I feel like whatever happens in the Middle East, these people are ignored so for me, it's documenting that ignorance. I'm not saying these people should go back; just that something should be done. It's inhumane that so many people live that."

Recently, Matar displayed her work at the South End Studios show in Boston. She hopes to take future projects beyond the Northeast.

"Someone contacted me from the Jerusalem Fund Gallery in Washington, D.C., so I'm going to have a show there," Matar said. "I also had several pieces shown in New York City and one in a gallery show in Seattle."

Pleasantly surprised

Because she loves working in the darkroom, but dislikes the marketing attached to showing her work, the popularity of her photos has surprised her.

"For me it's a big thing to show it and bring awareness to the situation," Matar said. "The attention feels like it's happening all of a sudden, but it's very encouraging."

(Editor's Note: Most photographs are marked individually for sale. Rania Matar will be available to discuss her work at the exhibition's opening on Oct. 5 from 6 to 8 p.m. The exhibit will run through Oct. 31 at the Boston Public Library, Allston branch.)