

# A Fisherman in New York's Sea of Faces

Brandon Stanton, left, photographed and talked with Jonathan Cummings, who was restocking an East Village bar on Tuesday. Credit Christian Hansen for The New York Times



**By Julie Bosman**

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Here's how Brandon Stanton spends several hours each day: He walks up to total strangers in New York City, requests permission to take their pictures and then asks questions so personal they might make Oprah Winfrey blush.

"What was the saddest moment of your life?" Mr. Stanton asked Jonathan Cummings, a 29-year-old from Queens who was loading crates of beer into a restaurant in the East Village on Tuesday. Mr. Cummings, who had just agreed to be photographed and seemed charmed by Mr. Stanton, didn't hesitate before giving an answer. (It involved an arrest after a brawl in Las Vegas.)

With a combination of disarming folksiness and passable — though admittedly inexpert — photography skills, Mr. Stanton has achieved one of the most unlikely success stories in a city filled with them. After posting pictures and quotations on his Facebook page,

Tumblr blog and website, HumansOfNewYork.com, he has amassed more than one million fans in three years.



“I really don’t have time to talk, these shadows are changing every second.” Credit Brandon Stanton

Mr. Stanton is a 29-year-old Georgia native with no training as a journalist. He has owned two cameras in his life and admits he has never learned the technically correct way to use them. When he moved to New York in 2010, he was friendless, nearly broke and recently relieved of his job as a bond trader in Chicago.

In the three years since, he has transformed himself into a recognizable face (who is approached by fans several times a day) with a healthy income unusual for a young, inexperienced photographer.

Mr. Stanton grew up in an Atlanta suburb and attended the University of Georgia. After graduating as a film major, he found a job in Chicago as a trader, and on the weekends, he spent hours photographing that city.

But after he was laid off in 2010, Mr. Stanton decided to shift to a completely new career. He moved to New York, where he didn't know a single person. Much of his time was spent on an ambitious project he dreamed up, photographing 10,000 people and mapping their whereabouts as a sort of virtual map of New York.



Image

“I can tie a full Windsor while driving down the road at 65 miles per hour.” Credit Brandon Stanton

After several months, he began moving in a different direction, interviewing his subjects and asking them about their lives, their struggles, their disappointments and their hopes.

Most people brushed him off. “It was very emotionally draining at first,” Mr. Stanton said. “I’d be really disappointed when people would say no.”

But his project gradually attracted an audience, mostly people in their 20s who left enthusiastic comments on his website. When his Facebook page had collected more than 200,000 followers, Mr. Stanton decided it was time to collect the pictures into a book. St. Martin’s Press, part of Macmillan, was the only publisher willing to print the book in hardcover.

Yaniv Soha, the acquiring editor, said Mr. Stanton has the rare gift of being able to connect with random people. “It’s about the stories as much as it is about the photos,”

Mr. Soha said. “It’s really about his ability to relate to people and convey what makes them individual.”



A \$21,000 Cosmetology School Debt, and a \$9-an-Hour Job



“We ordered her those pants, and as soon as they arrived, she cut off the bottoms and made a pair of gloves.” Credit Brandon Stanton

On Tuesday morning, Mr. Stanton set off on the sidewalks of the East Village in search of material. While he has taken pictures in every borough, he tends to focus on Manhattan for its density and varied street life. He does everything he can to warm up his potential subjects, wearing a backward baseball cap, gray hoodie and New Balance sneakers to look casual. When he approaches a stranger, he hunches over or squats down, sometimes sprawling his 6-foot-4 frame on the sidewalk.

“It’s all about making myself as nonthreatening as possible,” he said. “I lower my voice, I get down on the ground.”

The first person Mr. Stanton approached was Ruben Lora, a 43-year-old maintenance worker, who was sitting outside a bar with four large bottles of laundry detergent at his feet. He instantly agreed to be photographed, telling Mr. Stanton about his previous life as a would-be major league baseball player, when he played in the Dominican Republic until he was in a motorcycle accident that ended his career. Hiking up a leg of his paint-flecked jeans, he showed Mr. Stanton a scar on his calf. The accident, Mr. Lora said, “ruined my life.” He paused. “I don’t know why I’m telling you this,” he said.

Shortly afterward, Ignacio Quiles, a 60-year-old haberdasher, stopped while walking his dogs to talk to Mr. Stanton. Within a few minutes, he was reminiscing about the death of a close friend and the twists and turns his career has taken.

It is that intimacy, combined with photos that are plain and straightforward rather than high concept, that has made Mr. Stanton’s fan base so fervent. As Mr. Stanton was preparing to wrap up his wandering for the day, Jessica Ruvin, a student at the Fashion Institute of Technology, approached him on the street and asked him to pose for a picture with her. “I’m such a big fan,” she said. “He exhibits the best part of New York — people on the street.”