

Artivism, Virtual Workshops, and the Pandemic

by Adreonna Bennett

I was hired as a Community Engagement Archivist in the Special Collections and University Archives unit at J. Murrey Atkins Library, University of North Carolina at Charlotte in June 2019. Not only was this my first full time library job but it was also a new position within the library. The first few months consisted of meeting my colleagues and important community members to get the lay of the land. Through these meetings, I was introduced to Alvin C. Jacobs, Jr. Alvin is a local Charlotte photographer and social justice activist. Jacobs was also the artist in residence at the Levine Museum of the New South and the Harvey Gantt Center for African American Art & Culture. At the latter, he created an exhibition entitled “Welcome to Brookhill,” which documented a neighborhood in Charlotte threatened by gentrification due to its proximity to uptown Charlotte. After the debut of his exhibit, awareness of this neighborhood increased, and public conversations turned into how the developer could work with the Brookhill community to ensure residents were not forced out.

Partnering with a Community Photographer

Jacobs has captured eye-catching and emotion-evoking images of uprisings and protests that have occurred over the last five or so years. These movements are not new but, with the advent of social media, it is easier for them to be documented. They are typically sparked by the murder of a Black person at the hands of law enforcement. Sometimes it is by a vigilante set on taking matters into their own hands, which was the case in the killings of Trayvon Martin in 2012 and Ahmaud Arbery in 2020. Charlotte itself is no stranger to such events with Keith Lamont Scott being murdered in 2016¹ and Danquiers Franklin in 2019² at the hands of Charlotte Mecklenburg Police Department.

During my meeting with Jacobs over a cup of coffee, he mentioned wanting to lead a workshop that would teach people how to take social justice pictures safely by

using something just about everyone has on them: a cell phone. He explained that he had seen well-meaning people be injured by law enforcement or arrested for taking pictures, which could have been prevented if they had better situational awareness and knew when it was time to leave. While talking with him, I felt how important this was not only to him but to the community and the historical record. Photographs and videos can and have changed the common narrative around protests and uprisings, thereby passing the mic (or lens in this case) to those typically left out.

We planned to host these workshops before the Republican National Convention that was scheduled to take place in Charlotte in August 2020. In previous years, political conventions have been spaces of contention where supporters and protesters make their grievances known and sometimes clash, often leading to involvement from law enforcement. By hosting these workshops prior to this event, participants who wanted to document public activities surrounding the Republican National Convention would be equipped with the skills to safely do so.

Workshop Planning

Identifying a granting source for this project became the next task. Like most libraries, funding at UNC Charlotte Libraries is tight, especially for specialized projects or one-off events such as this. From my colleagues, I learned more about small grants offered by UNC Charlotte. The Chancellor's Diversity Challenge Fund was created by former Chancellor Phillip DuBois in an effort to "support faculty, staff, and student initiatives promoting the daily value of diversity in the intellectual life of campus." These small institutional grants are given on an annual basis in June and require that programming be completed within the fiscal year. In December 2019-February 2020, I completed an application for the Chancellor's Diversity Fund Challenge and the project was approved in May 2020 for \$2,250, with the majority going to Jacobs as an honorarium. The remainder was spent on marketing, masks, and refreshments. During the initial planning stages before COVID-19 hit, we decided to have the series be four parts. The first workshop would introduce Jacobs and the importance of social justice photography. The second

workshop would have Jacobs guiding participants in taking their own photographs. The third workshop was to be presentations where participants would talk about the pictures they took and Jacobs would offer feedback. The fourth and final workshop for the series would be a crash course on personal digital archiving and teaching participants best practices for saving their photographs and videos given by our digital archivist, Tyler Cline.

Transitioning to Virtual in a COVID-19 environment

Planning for the workshop series did not start until the end of May to early June. Given the nature of Jacobs' work, it seemed almost impossible to turn an in-person photography workshop into a virtual program. We envisioned that this workshop series would provide hands-on professional photography training and let participants practice their skills in different environments. Another challenge was North Carolina's constant change in the number of people allowed to gather inside or outside due to COVID-19, which made it difficult to plan any in-person components of the workshop series. COVID restrictions on gatherings prevented the Republican National Convention from being held, which was a major event that the workshop series was initially centered around. Taking all of these things into consideration and weighing the pros and cons, we decided to continue virtually. The university and city of Charlotte's mandates played a huge role in our decision making.

After talking to Jacobs about his vision and desired outcomes, we settled on reducing the number of workshops from four to three to keep participant interest and maximize Jacobs' time. The first workshop remained the same topically but had to be presented via Zoom. Jacobs was still able to convey what social justice photography means and showed examples of his work. The second workshop became a socially-distanced walking tour of the uptown area of Charlotte and stayed true to its purpose. However, there was a 25-person restriction to this event due to university guidelines. Masks were required (we had some on hand for anyone who forgot) and social distancing was encouraged. Participants brought their own cell phones and professional grade

cameras to take pictures of the area. Jacobs was still able to give guidance while also serving as a model for pictures to show differentiation between lenses and techniques. After the walking tour, participants sent in any images they had and Jacobs critiqued them live during the next workshop. Our digital archivist, Tyler Cline, was still able to give a Zoom presentation about how participants could archive their own images and videos to save them for future generations. He shared best practices from Witness.org and Authority Collective about how photographers can protect those photographed and themselves from police retaliation. While the purpose of the workshop was to equip attendees with the tools necessary to document history happening around them, we also recognize that these images could be used negatively against those protesting.

Impacts and Takeaways

Despite the challenges presented by COVID-19, the content and purpose of the workshops stayed the same. Over all three workshops, we had around 43 registrants and 30 participants, with the first session being the most well-attended. The outdoor photo tour had 15 participants, which was higher than anticipated. Had we been able to have all in-person sessions, I assume attendance would have been higher. Those who attended ranged from Charlotte community members to UNC Charlotte students and staff, but we had several student participants back out due to a class conflict. We sent out an anonymous feedback survey after the event to gauge participant interest in this topic and what they learned overall. There were only two respondents, but they provided positive words about the workshops. One respondent said, “Alvin made social justice photography seem really accessible and something that anyone could do, even with limited equipment.” When asked about digital archiving, the other respondent said “[The workshop] made me realize that I need to go through my images and other digital media and make a plan for organizing and preserving them.” These comments showed that our anticipated outcomes were successful but with only two participants respondents it is hard to say what the overall experience was.

One unintentional outcome from this workshop series was a student art donation. A student attendee created a

photography exhibit around race, lynching, and violence against Black bodies. His work was exhibited in the gallery of UNC Charlotte's student union and in a community gallery. After these exhibitions were over, he chose to donate his artworks to the Special Collections & University Archives at J. Murrey Atkins Library. Without this event, he may not have considered the university's archives as a place for his work and that history would have been lost. While we hope to partner with other community activists and photographers in the future, there is still a distrust between large institutions and communities, particularly in Black and Brown communities where there may be a history of marginalization. It is imperative that archivists work with activists and community organizations to preserve their records in a way that is mutually beneficial for both parties.

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NOTES

1. "Shooting of Keith Lamont Scott," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shooting_of_Keith_Lamont_Scott

2. Amanda Zhou, "In Rare Move, Charlotte Review Board Disagrees with CMPD on Danquirs Franklin Case," *Charlotte Observer*, February 6, 2020, <https://www.charlotteobserver.com/news/local/article239926313.html>, 1.