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'FACEBURGH'

MAKING A MOSAIC OF FELLOW PITTSBURGHERS

— William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Coriolanus*

On the afternoon of April 15, 2011, freelance film editor **Matte Braidic** of the South Side was waiting to meet a friend to watch a Penguins playoff game at a neighborhood pub. He pulled up a chair on an outdoor patio facing East Carson Street and pulled out a Nikon 3100 camera he'd purchased a few weeks earlier. Killing time, he snapped off pictures of passers-by on a typically cloudy and mild spring Pittsburgh afternoon.

He later posted them to his Facebook page. Friends "liked" his pictures. He took and posted more. They "liked" those ones too. As did complete strangers. Take. Post. Like. Repeat.

A few idle moments eventually morphed into a passionate documentation of his fellow Pittsburghers going about their daily lives. He's since taken 13,404 pictures of different pedestrians in the city's prime thoroughfares on the South Side, Shadyside, Downtown and Oakland, and shared them with the world.

According to Facebook analytics, just since March 6, over 7,400 unique users in 20 countries across six continents have viewed his images — purely by social media word of mouth.

He's dubbed his project "Faceburgh." Here are some things he's observed — about people, Pittsburgh, and himself — while taking all those pictures.

— Dan Gigler (dkgigler@post-gazette.com)

"I love — love — to look at people ... Human beings are the most interesting subjects you can stick in front of a camera. No offense to sunsets, or trees or bugs and all of the other things ... I love to people watch. I could absolutely do it all day long. I've spent a lifetime doing it. I don't know if I'm an expert in it, but I'm certainly an interested observer.

"My main 'studio' is at 18th and Carson, which I consider the Times Square of South Side. Bruegger's Bagels has four tables on their sidewalk. I tie up my dog, I get my iced coffee and I take pictures as people walk by. There's no more diverse intersection than 18th and Carson. Absolutely, positively ... The most incredible array of Pittsburghers walk that promenade on a daily basis. Sitting there feels like Europe.

"I usually shoot at the end of the day, between 4 and 6 p.m., which is the sweet light of the day. Usually pictures are taken at events — places where people gather. These are pictures of the ordinary. Of people in transit, up and down the sidewalk, going various places. And I'm able to capture that moment.

"This reinforces what I like about Pittsburgh. It's a city. It's a vibrant city with all sorts of characters walking down the sidewalks — this isn't just a one-faced town. ... [Faceburgh] is a photo census of Pittsburgh. I don't discriminate. Anyone who walks in front of my lens, I snap. And who's ever in focus when I go to look at the photos, they get in.

"Not everybody likes their picture taken. Angry reactions to my pictures are only about one half of one percent of all the pictures I've taken. People smile. People are oblivious to me ... But every once in a while, someone puts up ... a one-fingered salute [laughs]. I had a dude

who sat there, with his finger in my face. We had a standoff ...

"I believe in what I'm doing. I believe in the constitutional rights that I have to do it. Privacy ends at your front door, so if you're out in a public place, you're allowed to be photographed, by me or a hidden camera on a pole. Anybody. I'll let my pictures speak for themselves. But sometimes you have to stand your ground and take the heat.

"When I posted them to Facebook — the first 200 photos that I shot, I got an immediate reaction to them. People with their comments and their 'likes.' After posting my first 200 I set an initial goal — let me go for 1000, and the more photos I posted, the more recognition I got, and the more outpouring from friends and strangers about how much they loved the photos and that has pushed me forward.

"The winter of 2011 was a particularly difficult one in my life. I suffer from bipolar disorder and the despair was the deepest I'd ever experienced. For me despair is hopelessness. It is when you lose a horizon. Because you aren't moving towards anything. ... I knew I needed to inject something into my life to change things up. I'd always wanted a camera, and I thought that would be the right way to start.

"To take a picture you have to focus on something. And I chose people walking down the sidewalk to focus on. ... From the day I started shooting these photos, I became me again. I had purpose. I had a story to tell. It gave me a reason to get up. For somebody with my affliction, when you don't have a reason to get up — that's a really lousy place to be. ... I've been struggling so long with my illness, and all of a sudden, I can make something that went beyond me. I could touch others with my art. It sustains me.

"I know that I'm onto something — I know that people are getting what I'm presenting to them.

"I consider myself a dude with a camera, telling a story. As a photographer, I'm a rank amateur. But I know how to tell a story ... I've created a reality photo channel, that is as close to the truth of [these streets] as is possible, without it being a hidden camera ... I'm trying to mimic the experience that if you were sitting at that table at that moment, you get to see what I get to see. To get the experience of the promenade.

"I believe that there's a story there ... It is a snapshot of this year in Pittsburgh. That these were the people who walked the streets of this town. ... That these were the ordinary citizens that you might not look at, but when you see a photo and you have to stop and ponder that ... You can look at them and say 'wow that's an interesting person' — looking at what makes them, them. The choices of what they chose to wear on that particular day — look how they hold themselves, how they carry themselves, as they walk down the street.

"I'm a prouder Pittsburgher because of this project. I get to document who makes up our city ... and with the connection to social media — all the diaspora of our Pittsburgh family — Pittsburghers here, Pittsburghers elsewhere, people who aren't Pittsburghers, they get to see who it is that makes up our city.

"All it takes is putting myself in a place where the world walks by. That's it. ... That's the gig."

