Sisters of the Commonwealth [1]

May 9, 2014 Photography [2]
Diversity [3]

Image Essay by Meg Birnbaum



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The Boston Order: A New Family

There are 3,000-plus Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence worldwide, with 18 sisters, novices, postulates, and aspirants in the Boston area. For three years, I have walked in gay pride parades with them, screamed encouragements alongside them at Boston's annual AIDS Walk, accompanied them to fancy fundraising dinners at city hotels, brought friends to their monthly Drag Bingo charity events, and sailed with them while they've sold raffle tickets on Boston harbor cruises.

From my very first email contact with them, the Sisters welcomed me with warmth and trust, appointing me their "photo historian" shortly after my first visit. When we were growing up, my sisters and I used to wish unrealistically for an older brother. Now the Sisters of the Commonwealth have become my brothers—my new family.

I never tire of watching as they artfully manifest into their "avatars," although it takes each an average of an hour and a half to do so. Their social activism has the seemingly simple goal of inspiring acceptance and more tolerance of different lifestyles, all while raising money for the LGBT community and other causes. Watching the reactions on the faces of strangers in the crowds as we pass, I witness the public's ability or inability to process the sight of these "clown nuns"—to question and to learn—and the Sisters' continuous optimism makes me feel hopeful.

The human stories behind photographs can be tools for supporting social change. I hope that by sharing these photographs of the Sisters with the public I am contributing to and echoing their desire to build a better world.

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Meg Birnbaum is a photographer and graphic designer. She is director of communications for the Griffin Museum of Photography in Winchester, Massacushetts, where she produces the exhibition catalogs associated with the museum's exhibitions and is a member of the exhibition committee.

She has had solo exhibitions at the Griffin Museum of Photography during the Flash Forward Festival; Corden Potts Gallery, San Francisco; the Lishui International Photography Festival, China; the Museum of Art Pompeo Boggio, Buenos Aires, during the biennial Encuentros Abiertos Festival de la Luz; and in Kobe, Japan. Her work has been part of many juried international and national photography competitions. Birnbaum was an invited exhibitor at Flash Forward Festival 2011 in Boston. Her work is in the permanent collection of the Museum of Fine Art, Houston, and the Lishui Museum of Photography, China.

Birnbaum has taught illustration at Montserrat College of Art and assisted Karen Davis with the portfolio-building Photography Atelier classes at Lesley University and the Griffin Museum of Photography.

Meg Birnbaum was also a featured artist in one of TW's first issues. See Judith Ross's January 2011 Talking Art column "Opening Herself to the World." [4]

For the complete "Sisters of the Commonwealth" portfolio and other work, see her website, Birnbaum Photography [5].

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