

Sisters in the Hood

With her Upstate Girls project, photographer Brenda Ann Kenneally treats the lives of her working-class subjects with respect—a respect often missing in our class- and image-conscious society

By Meisha Rosenberg

REMEMBER A FEW YEARS AGO WHEN I FIRST SAW BRENDA Ann Kenneally's photographs of women and their families, members of Troy's working poor; she had won the Pictures of the Year International Community Awareness Award. (Her images are still at poyi.org.) Those black-and-white photographs are seared on my memory. They showed me my neighbors—people I pass on the street all the time—women and children whose very faces tell of chronic hardships. The pattern is familiar from news headlines: teen pregnancy, fathers in jail, little access to health care or transportation. But where this litany of circumstances is all too often rendered with a crime blotter's terseness or a sociologist's cold prescriptions, Kenneally's images humanize. We get to know individuals with identities and names—Dana, Stacy, and Jessica—as they grow up, fall in love, have children.

In a remarkable confluence of art and life, images from *Upstate Girls*, an ongoing documentary project, are on exhibit at Troy's Sanctuary for Independent Media, on the same block where some of the women live. It is a homecoming for her work in more ways than one: Kenneally herself grew up in a working-poor family in Albany. Further erasing the traditional distance between artist and subject, some of the women have collaborated by hanging pictures and writing their own text on the walls. "Have you ever been in a situation where the best thing you can do is the hardest thing you'll ever have to do?" one writes. Another has been leading a scrapbooking workshop at the Sanctuary. "One girl makes them, and she's really big into the crafts part of it, and now it's going to be digital and I'm trying to organize a nonprofit around it. It's crazy in a way, but it's also very healing," Kenneally says. Related to the exhibit, the Sanctuary also hosted a conversation with teenage girls and advocates of health and legal aid.

Branda Miller, one of the Sanctuary's founders, explains, "The Sanctuary is a place that's all about using art for change and giving voice to the voiceless, or those who aren't normally heard in the mainstream media. So the fact that she was doing this work right in the community that we're in, in North Central Troy, it very much fit with our mission."

Miller says Kenneally is now using a variety of media, such as video with sound, on Web sites (brendakenneally.com and therawfile.org): "She can't stay in the box of her professional form. She's breaking out all over the place." Kenneally is "using creative practice for community organizing and empowerment." She's also been working with digital color photography, since, as Kenneally has said, "teenage girls live in color."

DOWNSTAIRS, IN A HALLWAY COMPRISING THE Underground Art Gallery, individual photos are casually tacked up, while upstairs, large banners juxtapose photographs of the women with images of consumer culture, prison life, and women's labor history in Troy. Kate Mullaney, who headed the pathbreaking women's Collar Laundry Union in the 1860s, would be proud, if dismayed, that we're still fighting the same injustices. Kenneally says, "It really is



Upstate girl:
Brenda Ann
Kenneally

marginalization of a very American kind. It felt like timeless America in a way. Also, pop culture and music have done a lot to sort of glorify the 'ghetto fabulous.' So it's poverty with bling. It's commodified, really."

Kenneally is intense and full of energy, and she has become a protective mother figure to the women (she imagines they feel she is "nagging" them). This deep bond shows. She says, "It would be easy to objectify. It would be easy to just make art and leave. It would be easy to make art, show in Europe and not be across the street. But that's not what I feel rewarded by, and it's not really where I feel the work is doing any good."

What is remarkable about Kenneally's images and her career—she has published in *The New York Times Magazine*, *Rolling Stone*, and *Ms.* and won numerous awards, including a Soros Criminal Justice Media fellowship and several National Press Photographers Association Awards—is her unstinting honesty. She portrays intimate moments tenderly, but she does not sentimentalize. Her work follows in the tradition of Dorothea Lange's Depression-era images and the superlative work done by Jim Hubbard with *Shooting Back*, the project that put cameras in the hands of homeless children. But the personal engagement of Kenneally's work makes it stand out.

Girls and women smoke cigarettes, hug their children, and live in basement apartments or welfare hotels in which they face the emotional chaos of transience. Consumer culture constantly urges messages of sexism and celebrity. In one remarkable image, a little girl looks out a window, dwarfed by a life-sized poster of Britney Spears posed bursting out of a frame of another window. Miss Uncle Sam girls uneasily smile onstage, holding bouquets of roses and flanked by trophies.



John Whipple

Another photo shows a small boy placing a dollar bill on a store counter, surrounded by ads for beer, cigarettes, and boxes of candy. One mother works, and eats, at McDonald's and inevitably gains weight. A young woman deals with depression after time spent in jail.

Too often, it's clear that legal interventions don't take the contingencies of women's lives into account: Courts investigate working mothers on charges of neglect, prying children away; medication is thrown at kids with behavioral problems with little explanation; men are locked up for years (the word "upstate" in the title can refer to incarceration in one of the many prisons north of New York City).

Her engagement with her Troy subjects started after Kenneally's photographs of her Brooklyn neighbors (depicted in her book, *Money Power Respect*) appeared in *The New York Times Magazine* in 2003, accompanying an excerpt from the book *Random Family* by journalist Adrian Nicole LeBlanc. Kenneally kept in touch with one of the women, who would eventually bring her back to the Capital Region. She recalls, "I remember feeling like, gosh, this is so much like the way I grew up." Kenneally's parents were divorced and she took care of her siblings until she was moved to a group home. She struggled with addictions to drugs and alcohol. In an interview for AlterNet, she recalled, "I got into a lot of trouble, and I was called bad and incorrigible. And ever since that time, I have been a fierce advocate for the 'bad and incorrigible' people, especially children and women." She eventually left for Florida, where she studied at the University of Miami's photojournalism department.

Her story of success is one that has a lot to teach about what does—and doesn't—work when it comes to urban poverty. While she's garnered many honors, her work still needs to be more widely known. Her struggles, and those of the women she photographs, are—have to be—our struggles.

Upstate Girls will be up at the Sanctuary for Independent Media (3361 6 Ave., Troy) through the end of May. For more info, call 272-2390.