Shooting in the Eye of the DRUG STORM

DANIEL BEREHULAK, THE RECIPIENT OF THE PRESS CLUB’S DANIEL PEARL AWARD, FOUND AN ASSIGNMENT LIKE NO OTHER IN THE PHILIPPINES

BY ALEXANDRA BERZON

After reports emerged last year of the Philippines’ bloody drug war, including the murders of thousands of drug users and dealers at the hands of police, freelance photojournalist Daniel Berehulak went to Manila to document it for The New York Times. His photos of murder victims and their families, along with jail cells and vigil sites—and the essay he wrote to accompany them—revealed that the government’s account of the drug war was not the same as what was being experienced on the streets. Published in December 2016, his work was a vivid wake-up call. It won the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for breaking news photography.

Berehulak, who has worked in hot spots around the globe, is the recipient of the Los Angeles Press Club’s Daniel Pearl Award for Courage and Integrity in Journalism. We spoke to him from Mexico City, where he now lives.

How did you get started as a photojournalist?
I grew up in Sydney, Australia, on a farm. I studied history in university and had no idea what I wanted to do, but I was able to travel through playing sports. I took my camera with me and was curious about traveling and discovering the world. I came across the World Press Photo Exhibition in Vienna when I was 23. My sister also passed away, which led me to throw everything in and realize life is short. I started studying photography in a course and then I dropped out. I was freelancing for a small agency at that time. I worked with amazing photographers and learned mostly from them in the field.

What drew you to the Philippines story?
I noticed when Rodrigo Duterte was campaigning for president, there was alarming rhetoric coming from the Philippines. He was known for death squads. When he came to power, he had based his campaign on fighting corruption and fighting crime and equated drugs and high levels of users to high crime rates. The way he was going to combat that was by tackling the drugs. In the first month or two, the bodies started piling up in the streets and it was a very bloody war. There were local journalists covering the story. It was something I felt was kind of under-reported. I had been in touch with Filipino friends whom I had worked with in Pakistan and other places, and I spoke with them and they said the story is still going on and there is no end in sight. That led me to pitch it to my editor. I landed in Manila September 28 last year.

How did the work proceed?
I was reaching out to friends and colleagues and found an amazing local journalist. She was my fixer. We worked together over the duration of 36 days to report the story. When I met up with Rica Concepcion and started going out with the local journalists, accompanying them, we would start with the crime scenes. I found out what the story was at that time.
How much pushback did you get from police?
From the police at the scenes, they weren’t really pushing back. Sometimes they wanted us there as well because at the start I think they were kind of proud of what they were doing and believed it was the right thing. It was this level of impunity they were acting with. They would present the information like it was a "buy bust" operation and say here are the drugs in the pocket of the guy and the gun they tried to shoot us with. But then we realized so many of the killings had these same details. It appeared they were planting the drugs, planting guns, and that some of the people weren’t even involved in drugs at all.

What was the impact after your story ran?
The president put out a statement directly after the story ran saying it was completely biased and completely one-sided. But we were only reporting and using the figures the Philippines national police had given us. The U.S. apparently halted aid that was heading to the Philippines. We don’t know if that was direct result of the reporting, but there certainly was so much more attention on the story. I was targeted by Duterte trolls and supporters and received death threats, dozens and dozens of death threats and emails. On the flip side, I had so many emails from people all over the world reaching out and saying how can we help, how can we donate money?

What is it like now for journalists in the Philippines?
They are doing amazing work there. This is something happening on their doorstep. We report on a 35-day period and go home, but these guys are covering this day in and day out. The group doing the nightshift there are young, energetic journalists who find it deeply disturbing that this is happening in front of them.

What was the most difficult moment for you in the reporting?
One night we made it late to a scene, and all I could hear down the street as we were approaching were the cries of a widow. I got there and you miss the scene but it was kind of—it just made you understand how futile in a way my efforts were.

At certain times it just felt overwhelming and disheartening. I talked about this a lot with the guys we were working with. We all agreed that what we were doing was important because people in 15 years time will read what was happening in history books. If we weren’t doing our job it would be a completely one-sided account of official police operations trying to combat drug usage, and all of the voices of the families wouldn’t be recorded. We were doing something that was important, writing history and giving a balanced account of what was going on.

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- Vin Scully on his friend Jaime Jarrin, ESPN.com, May 8, 2017

From his ‘toughest assignment’ at Arlington National Cemetery in 1963, international broadcasts with presidents and foreign leaders, to bringing baseball home to millions of fans, Security Benefit is proud to honor Jaime Jarrin’s Hall-of-Fame career spanning nearly seven decades.

Thank you for your contributions to journalism and the game of baseball. Congratulations on receiving the L.A. Press Club's Public Service Award.

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