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Indelible images, mystery subject



Howard Bingham

Howard Bingham shot this photo of a young girl chasing down Robert Kennedy 40 years ago. Bingham is trying to locate the girl.

Nearly 40 years after a photographer snapped shots of a girl running up to Robert Kennedy, her identity remains unknown.

By Bob Pool, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
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She came out of nowhere, and in a flash she was gone.

And nearly four decades later the surprise encounter between a little girl and Sen. Robert Kennedy still haunts Howard Bingham.

The 1968 California presidential primary election was days away, and Kennedy was campaigning in Watts. Bingham, a photographer best known for chronicling the career of boxing champion Muhammad Ali, was documenting the presidential hopeful's visit to the area, which three years before had been ravaged by rioting.

Kennedy was in a slow-moving convertible with then-state Sen. Mervyn Dymally, labor leader Ted Watkins and several others. The motorcade was near the corner of 103rd Street and Central Avenue when the girl ran toward it.

Bingham raised his camera and snapped a series of pictures as she sprinted eagerly toward the car, her pigtails flying.

She was about 9 or 10 years old. She had a Kennedy-for-president bumper sticker stuck to her red dress and light blue sweater.

The sequence of six photos shows her running about a block to catch up with motorcade. In the final frame, she is wearing a huge grin when she shakes Kennedy's hand.

The girl turned and ran back to the sidewalk as Kennedy's car continued on its way.

The photos were never published. But Bingham never forgot the little girl with the happy grin.

Bingham photographed Kennedy extensively, but it is Kodak Ektachrome images of the senator and the girl in the pigtails that have stayed with him for 39 years.

Who is she? What kind of person did she grow up to be? How did Kennedy's murder affect her? How would her life have been different if her hero had not been gunned down and had gone on to win the presidency?

"That girl symbolizes the hope people had back then," said Bingham, who lives in South Los Angeles and is now 68.

- Two years ago, when a West Hollywood fine arts gallery mounted a display of his photographs, Bingham made certain the sequence with the girl was included. Perhaps her identity would surface, he figured.

It didn't. Now Bingham is preparing for a 40th-anniversary showing of his photos from 1968, and once again he is wondering about her. No one whom he has shown the photos to recognizes her.

- Watkins, who after the 1965 riots started the Watts Labor Community Action committee to provide jobs and social services to South Los Angeles, died in 1993 at age 71.

- Dymally, now 81 and a state assemblyman representing the Compton area, remembers Kennedy's Watts visit -- and the little girl.

"Back then every presidential candidate came to Watts," Dymally said. "Those days are gone. Now they go to Hollywood."

Gone too are the days when youngsters found themselves caught up in the excitement of politics and social change, he said.

"Young kids don't even know who Dr. King was," Dymally said, referring to the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. "I'm trying to put together a Young Democrats Club, and I can't get it started. Young adults aren't even interested in politics."

Bingham agreed. And young people have no sense of what 1968 was like. "People don't know history," he said.

Days after the girl and candidate photos were taken, Kennedy went on to win California's Democratic primary. He was shot to death shortly after making his election-night victory speech at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles.

For Bingham, the pictures of Kennedy and the girl became a metaphor for the turbulence of 1968, a year that started with such promise and ended so unsettlingly.

It was a year marked by student unrest on college campuses, the assassinations of Kennedy and King and nationwide protests against the Vietnam War. Rioting disrupted the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, and a Black Panther-police shootout rocked Oakland.

Bingham had photographed Kennedy several times in 1968. In March he had documented the senator's visit with farm labor leader Cesar Chavez, who was leading a grape boycott with farm workers in the San Joaquin Valley town of Delano. In April he had photographed him at King's funeral in Atlanta. Shortly before the June primary, he followed Kennedy's campaign to Sunset Boulevard.

After photographing King's funeral and then helping cover Kennedy's murder for Life magazine, Bingham went to Chicago to document the Democratic convention. He was horrified when he watched police clash with protesters outside the convention hall.

Bingham said Robert Kennedy's assassination forever changed the face of American presidential campaigning. Security around candidates has been tightened.

"Something like that little girl running up to Sen. Kennedy could not happen today," he said.

And maybe, he added, that's a good thing.

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