



## A photographer reflects

By Robin Bowman '82

*(Excerpt from an essay by Bowman in her recently released book, It's Complicated: The American Teenager, which features intriguing black-and-white Polaroid portraits of teenagers and their candid stories. Reprinted here with permission from Umbrage Editions.)*

This story begins in the summer of 2001 when a friend invited me to spend a couple of weeks with her extended family in a remote cabin in Canada. Seeking an escape from humid New York, I gladly accepted. The cabin was filled with teenagers, an age group that didn't even exist in my world in New York at the time, but I was immediately caught up in the excitement, openness, vulnerability, and idealism that infuse so many young people, regardless of circumstances. I was riveted by them and spent most of my two weeks there in the woods taking photos of these young people and learning the stories of their lives.

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I traveled the streets and subways of New York City looking for more teens to photograph. In the still pre-digital age, the Polaroid's ability to provide instantaneous footage piqued young people's curiosity, and when I gave them a chance to tell their story, it was remarkably easy for me to convince them to pose for and talk to me.

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Meeting these teenagers began to have an effect on me—I couldn't get enough. Each one was so different, so compelling, and so earnest. I felt that by connecting with these kids, I was growing as a human being; their stories were enriching mine.

Before long I became absorbed by the notion of discovering the "American Teenager." It became obvious that I couldn't accomplish this by staying in Brooklyn, so I decided to get in the car and go. In March of 2002, I embarked on the first of eight trips I would ultimately take over the course of four years. By the time I finished this

project I had traveled 21,731 miles through most of the regions and corners of the nation, met thousands of young men and women, and formally photographed and interviewed four-hundred nineteen of them, all of whom are represented in this book.... I remain honored that these amazing young people allowed me into their lives.

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This project drew me in, in part because of my own intimate recognition of the dichotomy between the surfaces and depths of people. My own teenage portrait would have shown a blond-haired girl who looked privileged and sheltered. But if I had had the opportunity to be interviewed, I might have said something about my father's alcoholism, and abuse, and my parent's divorce, and our fractured family. I was never able to fully express my feelings about those experiences at the time. Would my life have been different if my story had been told and if the real image of my life had been taken and shared?

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This project underscores the similarity and diversity that make up this country and this generation, and remind all of us that people are not necessarily who they appear to be.... We were each a teen once, and many of us will one day have teenagers who will become adults and our future leaders. It is undeniable that our children affect and reflect who we are as individuals and as a nation. Perhaps by coming to know our kids, adolescents on the cusp of adulthood, we can become acquainted, or reacquainted, with ourselves. 📷

*Robin Bowman's images are in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Chrysler Museum of Art, Cleveland Museum of Art, and the International Center of Photography, among others.*

