

UNFORGOTTEN

Gary Friedman talks to volunteer groups on both sides of the Atlantic who help honour and remember the shortest of lives

Maddux Achilles Haggard was born on February 4, 2005, with a condition called myotubular myopathy, which prevented him from breathing, swallowing, or moving on his own. The following six days, his parents Mike and Cheryl Haggard sat by his side with questions that had no answers.

Cheryl tried to create memories of their time together using her own digital camera. “Every time I tried to look through the viewfinder, my vision was blurred by tears.” In reviewing the pictures she captured, Cheryl said, “I saw our tear-stained cheeks, our red swollen eyes, our forced smiles, and the fear in our faces as we looked into the camera.” She also saw the background of the sterile inside of a hospital room.

On the sixth day of Maddux’s young life, his parents made the excruciating decision to remove him from life support. But Cheryl also knew she wanted professional images of Maddux that she could hang on her wall alongside the portraits of her other children – ones that did not look like poor-quality snapshots in a depressing place.

“Maddux deserved that space on our wall. I could not comfortably hang those raw color pictures I had taken. The color images bring back the reality of that day. I wanted heirloom portraits as a way to remember and honor our son,” said Cheryl. “This is what we needed to bring healing to our hearts.”

The start of something

It was then that her husband called photographer Sandy Puc’ to take black-and-white portraits of them cradling their son. Sandy created the most incredible images of Maddux while he was still alive, and also took sensitive images after he had died peacefully in her



Above, two of the photographs of Maddux taken with Mike and Cheryl Haggard by Sandy Puc’. Below and facing page: NILMDTS’s work continues.



arms. “That night was the worst night of my life. But when I look at the images, I am not reminded of my worst night. I’m reminded of the beauty and blessings Maddux continues to bring to our lives”, said Cheryl.

Those tender photographs inspired Cheryl Haggard and Sandy Puc’ to create *Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep* in 2005 as a nonprofit organization. NILMDTS exists to give bereaved families the gift of free professional heirloom portraits to bring healing and comfort. The organization is now well-established in hospitals within the USA, with a small presence also in Ireland, South Africa, and Canada. Currently they provide these services to about 5,000 families a year in the USA, about one-fifth of the estimated need.

Volunteers worldwide

“Our photographers don’t fit any particular demographic – we have young moms and dads with kids, attorneys, business owners, career people... it runs the gamut”, remarks Burt Rich, one of the organization’s Volunteer Coordinators and Area Coordinator trainer. “We even get a lot of retired people who are seeking to do something good and worthwhile”.

Burt’s story about how he joined the organization mirrors that of most volunteers interviewed: his family had suffered a tragedy, and he wanted to give back. His high-school-aged grandson, T.J., was an outstanding athlete in high school – one of the top 500 junior football players in the nation. Two years later he had died of cancer.

“Not long after that, my wife was reading an article about an organization that does photos for families who never get to take their baby home from the hospital.” Having been an amateur photographer most of his life, it

sounded interesting, so he called the area coordinator for Huntsville Alabama. It turns out they knew each other through his church. “I was in your children’s choir!”, she said. He took that as a sign.

“Everything happens for a reason”, he says, starting to tear up. “I never guessed it would be as fulfilling as it is. But I tell you, when I walk out of the hospital, I don’t have any problems.”

The screening process

Anyone wishing to volunteer their services must pass through a Membership Application Committee first – these are generally master photographers. They evaluate the images that the applicants submit, then there’s a rubric of 1-20 of five traits, including focus, composition, and lighting. If one or two skills are in need of improvement they’re coupled with a mentor for awhile. “We don’t want to hear how you *can* shoot in low light, we want to know *how* you use light”, says Burt Rich. “We teach off-camera lighting, be it a reflector or a light or large window. We don’t tell photographers what they need to use.” Other than that, bring your standard portraiture technique and a good dose of empathy.

Remember My Baby

The biggest obstacle to getting more photographers to sign up is the perception that the responsibility might be too emotionally overwhelming. “A lot of people say that” says Cheryl Johnson, co-founder of the *Remember My Baby* organization, which has been doing similar work in the UK since 2014, and is supported by The Guild of Photographers (as Gary found out after coming forward with the proposal to write about NILMDTS – Ed.).

“Our photographers are normally confident with what they do with their camera. It’s the interaction with the families that’s the problem: ‘What on earth do I say when I walk in that room? You can’t just say ‘Hi, how are you doing?’ That’s what they’re scared of – the human contact aspect.”

Here’s where the training really helps. “To this day I take a big



Photographs courtesy of Now I Lay Me Down To Sleep, with permission of those involved to allow use in this publication.



breath, and I walk in and I introduce myself” says Ms Johnson. “And I would normally say something like, ‘Hello, my name is Cheryl, and I’m here today to take beautiful pictures of Baby Charlie’. And I always call them ‘Mum and Dad’ because they are – especially if it’s their first baby. Normally that evokes a reaction – ‘Oh, a stranger just called us ‘mum and dad.’ And someone other than the midwife just used Charlie’s name. Out loud!’ That helps them relax.

“Then I tell them a little bit about what I’m going to do. Normally they’re in a daze and they won’t remember half of it. Sometimes they can’t even remember if it was a man or a woman who came. It’s from lack of sleep, it’s from grief, sometimes the mother has a lot of drugs.”

Practical aspects

A typical photographic session lasts between 30-45 minutes, and is comprised of standard newborn poses and family portraits. And it’s perfectly OK to capture the parents crying during the shooting – you want the portraits to be honest and truthful. Often photographers have the additional challenge of shooting around I.V. and intubation tubes. The trick there is to concentrate on other parts of the body, such as just the hands or feet.

Another big help is to have a photographer’s assistant help with your sessions, a service available to NILMDTS photographers. “Assistants do many useful things – hold reflectors, pose the baby (so you don’t have to take gloves on and off 20 times) and help in countless other ways”, says Mr Rich. “But to me, the nicest part about having an assistant is that once the session is over, and you walk out those two swinging doors, you’ve got somebody you can talk to and unpack that session with who was there. Having an assistant can really help you emotionally.”

The volunteering experience doesn’t have to be disruptive to your life. “I’ve been doing this coming up on two years” says Tricia Smith, who volunteers with NILMDTS in Tulsa, Oklahoma. “I happen to work at a newborn nursery at a hospital. And so I see



the medical side of what these parents go through as they're grieving. Knowing that I could potentially help alleviate some of that by giving them photographs that will last a lifetime and give them something to look back on and know that their baby was real and was here for a moment in time.

"The most valuable part of the training was how to interact with the families. In terms of ways to approach them about things, and what to say, what not to say. Treat the baby like she's a live baby. Talk to him or her. Call him by his name. All of those things that make it a personal experience for the family. They also teach the importance of portrait lighting – whether it be LEDs, off-camera flash, or light from a large window."

"You don't have to be on call every day", she says. "They just want you to live your life. Only accept the assignment if you're available. If there's no photographer available, the parents can always have hospital staff take pictures and then send the photos to volunteer retouchers. There's three of us in the Tulsa, Oklahoma, region and we'll text each other



Hands and feet are remembered in their own right. Top, from NILMDTS, above from RMB. Details may also be easier to handle emotionally than pictures which are a portrait of very premature or miscarried babies, like the examples below from Remember My Baby volunteers. Cheryl Johnson has been awarded the British Empire Medal for her work creating RMB, and in February the group handled its 5,000th assignment.

to see who can make the call. But there's no guilt involved if you turn it down."

How many calls a month can a volunteer expect? "We frame that question differently", says Burt Rich. "We ask volunteers, 'What was your expectation when you joined us? Did you expect to do 1 session a month? Two a month?' Then we try to meet that expectation. We don't want to burn people out."

Any advice for someone considering it but aren't sure about the emotional weight of the assignment? "You're probably stronger than you think you are", says Tricia Smith. "And although it might be emotionally difficult to see the parents going through such a painful time, the reward that you get knowing that you are giving them something that will help them through the grieving process makes it considerably less difficult."

Or as Cheryl Haggard, NILMDTS's founder, succinctly puts it: "Each life, no matter how brief, deserves to be honored."



Left: two approaches from members of the UK's Remember My Baby group. Right, a gathering of their photographers produced a distinctive collective circle.

If you would like information on the organizations in this article, or would like to volunteer as either a photographer, a photographer's assistant, or a digital retoucher, please visit:



<https://www.nowilaymedowntosleep.org/>
<https://remembermybaby.org.uk/>



Reaching across the void



Shelley Rigden: "I sadly have lost five babies but I am truly blessed to have five beautiful children that I get to hold every day. I lost my first baby at 17 due to domestic violence, then another when I was 22. I then lost three more in my 40s. The support that was available was non-existent, which was the hardest thing to cope with."

babies – came from words in Ed Sheeran's song *Small Bump* – "wrap your finger in their little hand".

Neil took the project forward during lockdown, and the 20 parents he photographed did not know the hand would be added in until they saw the final results. His self-portrait (left) is included, and like the others has a short statement to go with it – "My wife and I suffered our first miscarriage 12 years ago; however this would not be our last. The final miscarriage happened when our eldest was three and because we didn't want to tell her what had happened, we started trying to get pregnant again within a few days. The grief finally hit me 10 months after our second daughter was born and I broke down. We both agreed that after our second daughter, we couldn't deal with any more potential losses and so our family is now complete."

From this project, Neil created a section of his Made Portraits website titled "You Were Our



Neil discusses his print with judges Panikos Hajistilly and David Islip.

Baby" (see madeportraits.com). He also published the series using Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. It drew the attention of local media and gained coverage on radio.

Neil's business focuses on social photography from his barn studio near Glastonbury, but he's best known for his carefully styled and lit product photography (especially of sunglasses) which he demonstrated in a workshop at the Guild's event.



Above: this photograph of Lizzie Power was featured in the national press (Metro): "I lost my first baby, during my first pregnancy. No one tells you when you get pregnant, that it could go wrong, that one in four pregnancies end in miscarriage. I remember very clearly going to the toilet and seeing blood. Fear and panic set in, as I instinctively realised and knew that something was very wrong. Our bean was nicknamed 'Tiny' from the time we knew we were expecting, and was due January 17th. Thoughts of baby Tiny, come and go all the time, but that date is etched in my memory and always hurts. When you miscarry you go through a grieving process, not just for the baby you lost, but for the future you had planned that is also lost."



Left, Rob Ayers: "My wife and I are due to have what people refer to as our first baby in the summer of 2020. After losing five babies in the past, it's hard to see it in this way but sitting for this project has finally allowed us to acknowledge that the pain we felt and still feel is fine. The anxiety in this pregnancy due to all that has happened before has been very hard on both my wife and I and we still can't believe that we may actually have a baby to hold in the near future."

A happy postscript from Neil: "I am delighted to say that Lizzy and Rob went on to have the most beautiful little baby boy during the 2020 lockdown."

