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PHOTOGRAPHER TOM MARSHALL CAPTURES THE MOMENT IN HIS . . . MOVING PICTURES: [METRO Edition]

Nancy Imperiale Wellons, Sentinel Staff Writer. Orlando Sentinel. Orlando, Fla.: Sep 8, 2001. pg. E.1



Tom Marshall takes black-and-white photographs of children. Point, click, done. That's it. No biggie. He never poses them. Doesn't fool with fancy props or backdrops. Won't wipe the peanut butter and crackers off their faces. Catches their tears. Will snap a kid who has a wad of gum in his cheek. He can work a classroom, goofing and stretching his basset hound face and making silly noises and doing pratfalls, and snap 200 kids in less than two hours. One shot per kid is usually all he takes. Let's not make more of it than that.

"Look, this is a fun way to make a living," Marshall says. "In the grand scheme of things, it's not that significant. It's not finding cures for diseases or feeding hungry children. I don't get carried away." Somebody tell that to mother of two Bonnie Friedman. "Tom Marshall is better than chocolate!" Friedman gushes. "He is incredible. He has a magical way of capturing the children where, when you look at the pictures, there's just life shining out of each child's eyes. They're magnificent."

Tell the mother who happened to meet Marshall one day right after Hurricane Floyd menaced Central Florida. "She told me 'Oh, we had to evacuate so I grabbed my jewelry and all my Tom Marshalls and left.' " Marshall said to her: "That's nice, but I hope you also took some food and water."

At 65, Marshall is still the class cut-up, the kid who holds "rabbit ears" behind people's heads. When he ambles into a classroom in his khakis and deck shoes, he looks for the other clowns and bonds with them in a silly language of grunts and over-their-head insults ("Tough crowd. Are you all on the impeachment committee? Oh, you thought that was funny? Tell your wife over there.").

"Grandpa," he'll call them. That's his secret word, the one that sends them into smiley fits. Grandpa is a good word for Tom Marshall. It fits with his trifocals and his ever-present pipe and the way he'll get down on all fours and grab anything -- a stuffed animal, a plastic plate, a cardboard block smeared with questionable goo -- and put it on his head, just to make a kid smile. Is Grandpa how he'd describe himself? "No," he says, appearing to think hard. "Amish. I'd say turn-of-the-century Amish."

DEAR MR. MARSHALL,

I just wanted to tell you how much we enjoy your photos of our daughter, Bailey. This is the sixth year you have photographed her. Each is different and special and so "Bailey."

Check the desk of a local working parent and you're bound to see some Tom Marshalls. They decorate the offices of company presidents and pro basketball players and the dens of schoolteachers and salespeople.

The photos are shot during the school day and appear, 11-by-14 prints, in kids' homework folders. They are printed

by Marshall's daughter, Stephanie Ferguson, and delivered to schools by his ex-wife, Pat Ferguson. Few parents ever see Tom Marshall, unless they attend one of his "makeup days" at the Winter Park Civic Center. They can take the prints home and decide. Roughly 80 percent will pay \$24 for a Tom Marshall. The rejects are discarded. That bothers Marshall, but he long ago stopped trying to hang on to photos parents don't care for.

In 29 years, Marshall has shot nearly 400,000 children. He has shot the kids of kids he shot; soon he will be shooting the kids of those kids. He figures there are 2 million prints of his floating around -- enough for every resident of metro Orlando, plus extras for the grandparents. He has taken the last photo of children before they died. He has found the life shining from the eyes of children who are disfigured or sick or bald from chemotherapy.

He never had a grand plan. If photography hadn't worked out, maybe Tom Marshall would be a disc jockey or a political organizer or a designer of computer games. He could be living the life he envisioned in 1946. He was a 10-year-old paper carrier for The Lakewood (Ohio) Post and the paper interviewed him about his ambitions: to be a scientist and eat steaks and french-fried potatoes. That wouldn't be any sillier than what he's doing now, Marshall figures. Grown-ups take this whole photography thing seriously, but he knows preschoolers are on to him.

"When I leave a classroom, sometimes I'll tell kids 'Now remember, if anybody asks, you didn't see me this morning, OK? Because I tell my neighbors I have a real job. Don't blow my cover.'" The kids nod eagerly. They're in this together.

DEAR MR. MARSHALL,

I want to thank you for the beautiful picture you took of my daughter Joedie. I had it on my desk at work and people were spellbound by it. Everyone thought it should be on a magazine cover.

Tom Marshall Photography Inc. does not fool with contracts. The company visits about 90 private schools a year, mostly preschools and day-care centers, and has a waiting list. There is no studio. No gift certificates are available. No credit cards accepted. No rush deliveries. No frames or mattes. No floppy disks. No ordering pictures from previous years. No phone calls.

There are several Tom Marshalls in the phone book, but not this one. Tom Marshall is not his given name. Tom Marshall Ferguson is who he is, the baseball-loving kid who grew up to be the dark-haired guy with a jaunty grin and skinny ties who graduated in 1954 from Lakewood High School. He studied broadcasting at Northwestern University in Chicago. He called football, founded the Northwestern Jazz Society and hosted his own jazz radio show. He was a real hipster back then. Those were "my James Dean days," a perpetual cigarette dangling from his mouth, dark shades hiding his eyes, tooling around town in a roadster.

At some point, he moved to St. Louis, grew a goatee, and one day joined forces with another radio guy. "We put together a group of investors and bought a radio station," he says, making it sound as simple as taking a walk. "The Swingin' Swingers" reads a headline from a magazine story on the young media moguls, pictured dangling merrily from a radio tower. "That was crazy," he says, staring at the yellowed page in his monochromatic home office. In radio, he dropped his last name. The middle was easier to pronounce. At this point, the difference between Tom Ferguson and Tom Marshall is just syllables, he says. He answers to both.

In the 1970s, he sold his interest in the radio station, visited his retired parents in Winter Park, and moved here. He did all kinds of things: Emceed a 1971 POW/MIA awareness rally at Tinker Field (he got telegrams of support from Richard Nixon and Ross Perot). Tried publishing a handful of magazines; hosted several radio and TV interviews with such guests as Bonanza's Lorne Greene, and former Florida governors LeRoy Collins and Claude Kirk. Designed an Atari computer game for \$318.76.

But his main job was host of a late-night talk show on 740 AM (WKIS). For several years his show, which later migrated to 580 AM (WDBO), was one of the most popular on the air. "Oh yes," Marshall says, "I talked to every neurotic in Central Florida."

DEAR MR. MARSHALL,

We wanted to let you know how much we enjoy the black-and-white photographs that you take. You truly capture

the best of the children.

Tom Marshall has always enjoyed photography. Black-and-white photography, especially. It's more elemental. It can be grittier. Makes you pay attention. Color will let you go off on a lark. Black and white won't lie to you. "Think of all those great photos taken in the Oklahoma Dust Bowl. The anguish of the people. It would not have had nearly the impact in color. . . . My favorite photos from the Vietnam War are in black and white."

So it was natural that when Marshall's two children were small, he began taking their photos in black and white. Pat Hartwig, a director at his daughter's preschool at the First Presbyterian Church of Sanford, saw some of these shots. She asked Marshall to photograph the schoolchildren. Then a friend asked whether Marshall could come to his child's school. And so Tom Marshall Photography Inc. came to be. It was lucrative enough that Marshall left radio. The business has supported Marshall's family. He owns a boat, a town home in Thornton Park, and likes to travel with his wife, Lynn Ferguson, a painter.

"My worst nightmare," Marshall says, all mock-serious, "is that parents will wake up one morning and say 'I cannot believe I am buying black-and-white photos of my kids! What was I thinking?' " But that hasn't happened. Marshall has succeeded, despite no formal photography training, no high-powered business plan, and equipment that makes professional photographers chuckle in amazement.

Can a goofy grin and the word "Grandpa" really get you this far? Sure, say friends. If you're Tom Marshall. "Tom always had a way, all the time I've known him -- he will simply sit down and say 'Hmm, this is something I can do.' And then he'll do it and make a success out of it," says Russ Wheeler, a former radio colleague from Eustis.

But Marshall does have a small regret. One job he wishes he'd tried. "If I could be anything else, I'd be a pediatrician. I think it would be more meaningful." Marshall's long face grows serious -- serious-serious, not his customary mock-serious. If he smoked his pipe in the house, he would right now. Instead he leans back in his black computer chair and wonders. "I have found out I'm pretty good at relating to children. Which would prove handy if you were a pediatrician. Going to the doctor's a scary thing. I could listen to them, reassure them." Marshall's friend thinks he's really splitting hairs. "Well, you know," Wheeler says, "Tom is in the kid business now."

DEAR TOM,

Once again you do wonderful work. You now occupy one entire wall of our family room.

Marshall is driving to a job, horrified at himself. He has just used the term "drive-by shooting" to describe his technique. Earlier he referred to a quick visit to a preschool as "a little mop-up job." It's not entirely inaccurate. While there's no violence associated with a Tom Marshall photograph, there is a militarylike precision.

"I have printed hundreds of his film rolls, and he will take 36 exposures and get 35 children on there," says Julie Milford, co-owner of Photographic Group, the Orlando lab where Marshall processes his film. "He has obviously mastered this. I don't know how he manages. I know when I'm doing photo shoots, I'm constantly making sure I'm on the right f-stop, flash, etcetera, and to think about all of that and then try to make sure every child is smiling and laughing, plus have all these other kids sitting around making faces and trying to distract you. It doesn't matter. He gets it done."

Marshall drives with two hands on the wheel. He is describing his method. "With 2-year-olds you have to be more physical. Can't do verbal shtick. You do more Larry, Curly and Moe stuff. "Babies, you just pray for gas. It simulates a smile. Not that a smile has ever been a prerequisite. We even make a small mention of that in our info sheet. 'Don't be too quick to reject a nonsmiling photo.' Some of my favorite photos of my children and grandson Alex are not-smiling photos."

But 3's and 4's -- those are the classrooms Marshall lives for. That's where he uses the famous "Grandpa" line. "I don't know how I got onto that Grandpa thing. It's so ludicrous to them. I just walk in, do a double-take at one and say 'Hey, Grandpa, What're you doin' here?' "The kid'll say 'I'm not a grandpa. I'm a kid!' "I'll say 'Get outta here.' I'm not from New York, but I sorta talk like that. 'Get outta here, you're my grandpa. What're you doin' here

at school? You're supposed to be at the home.' "And by then the other kids are laughing because I called him Grandpa so I'll turn to one of them and say 'Grandma, what're you laughing at?' "Next thing you know, the whole room is laughing. I may be 20 seconds into it and it's amazing. They all think it's funny. To the point where children I've photographed before, they call me Grandpa as soon as I hit the door. 'Oh, here comes Grandpa.' "

DEAR TOM,

It's beautiful! It's beautiful! Thank you so much.

A Tom Marshall photo shoot is a blur. It's pudgy fingers, flashing lights, children giggling or screaming or looking dumbfounded. It's Marshall dropping objects off his head or kneeling so much there's Playdoh stuck to his pants, saying "Bada boom" or "Doop" and, every time he gets THE shot, "Bingo!" "He's in and out of the classroom in a matter of 7 1/2 minutes, and nobody really knows what happens until those glorious pictures come a few weeks later," says Karen Anderson, an owner of The Kenworthy School, a private school in Maitland. "Some new parents will say 'Oh, my son's hair is hanging in his eye. There's dribble on his mouth.' You need to set them back a second and say 'Isn't this him? Doesn't this capture your child, just as he is?' Sometimes it takes them a minute. Then they die for it."

On a recent morning, Marshall is paying a call to the classroom of 3-year-olds run by Miss Missy and Miss Gail at Winter Park's Redeemer Lutheran Learning Center. "Boys and girls, this is Mr. Marshall. He's my friend," says Miss Missy, standing next to Marshall in front of the rows of children. She turns to Marshall. "We talked about you this morning." Marshall gives her a horrified look. Both teachers laugh. The class is silent. Marshall keeps his camera down. He puts a brown bear on his head. "And this is my new hat. Whadda ya think?" Silence. He lets the bear fall off, saying "Whup!" Nothing. The teachers snicker politely. "Obviously not much," Marshall says. He puts the bear back and does it again. "Whup!" Silence. "This is a tough crowd," Miss Gail says. Miss Missy laughs. Marshall is busy scanning faces. He puts the bear back on. Lets it fall one more time. "Whup."

A squeal suddenly pierces the room. It's from a boy in back. The boy speaks no English. He hasn't been participating much in class. The teachers are amazed. Marshall does it again. The boy squeals louder. He claps his hands. He wiggles in his seat. His face shines. Other children begin to laugh.

Marshall calls a girl "Grandma" and she says "I'm not Grandma!" "Oh, I'm sorry," Marshall says. He sings nonsense "Doo-doo-doo- doo," and then stops, tilts his head, makes a face and says "Eww?" The laughter builds until, in the cacophony, Marshall pulls up his camera and shoots. Bingo! Shoots! Bingo! The class is carried away, a symphony of flying "Grandpas," squeals, giggling, and hurled kiddie insults like "You're a goo-goo, gaa-gaa!" Almost before it begins, it's over. Like a roller-coaster ride. Like a circus act.

"All right, boys and girls," Miss Missy calls. "You can go back to what you were doing. We are done. Can you all say thank you to Mr. Marshall for coming?" "Thank you!" yell the children. "Well, thank you for allowing me to visit," Marshall says. He walks to the door. Miss Missy is already leading an art project at the table. A brown-haired boy looks up from a paper filled with colors. "Hey, Grandpa!" he shouts, raising a hand. "I love you, Grandpa!" Marshall stops. He looks at the boy. He says, "I love you too, Grandpa."

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