



## Photographing Community: Wayne Lawrence

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“So many of us walk along in prison our whole lives, and some of us are lucky enough to find whatever it is that we need to get our freedom. For me photography has done that.”—Wayne Lawrence

When Wayne Lawrence spoke at the 2014 National Geographic Photography Seminar in January, he touched the audience with his honest story, striking portraits, and genuine spirit. His work is at once quiet and piercing, and once you’ve seen it you are introduced to a new community and maybe even new realizations about yourself.

Seminar emcee Vincent J. Musi introduced Lawrence with a few words about his book, *Orchard Beach: The Bronx Rivera*, likening it to a contemporary family photo album that is “staged in a living room built on water that gives, holds, and brings life together. Where no one is really at home, but in a place where they live—in their own skin, stripped of uniform—a narrative of love, family, and culture, without stereotype or judgement.” He concludes, “You can’t get there from here unless you know where you’re coming from.”

Something that Lawrence makes very clear is that he does know where he’s coming from. He’s continually reflecting on his past and reevaluating the purpose of his work. Lawrence completed his *Orchard Beach* project before he spoke at National Geographic, and since then he’s been busy working on new endeavors. “I went to the water after my brother’s death, and so somehow I found Orchard Beach, thankfully. But I’m done mourning. That was my medicine, being there at the beach. So I’m done, and now the journey continues,” he explains.

What has he been up to since then?

“I’m just celebrating life and living, and that’s what I want to portray wherever I go—It can be Soweto, it can be Rio de Janeiro—to show people with respect and dignity, especially people of color because I feel like you don’t really see much of that anywhere.”

The next place that he plans to do that is Detroit, where he’ll be working on his first ever assignment for National Geographic magazine.

“This is like a dream come true. Seriously. I know everybody says this, but it’s true. After years of being busy on my own it’s good to have people actually recognize the work and be respected and be asked to do what I always do anyways: just shoot the pictures that I want to shoot. I mean it doesn’t get any better than that really. It took a long time but I always knew that I didn’t want to be just a gun for hire.”