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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

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# THE BEAT



Andrew Cilea took a portrait of his cousin.



Kayla Withrow, 12



Brendon Dunn, 9



Amanda Hogate, 17

## 'PROJECT: Tomorrow'

### IS HERE

by Dagney C. Ernest

**P**roject: Tomorrow," a photo essay installation that captures a moment in the lives of young cancer patients, will open with a public reception from 5 to 7 p.m. Friday, Feb. 1, at Carver Hill Gallery, 264 Meadow St., Rockport.



Paul Denckla

The exhibition, which debuted last fall at the Maine Children's Museum in Portland, is the brainchild of Paul Denckla. Retired after years as a real estate investment advisor, mostly in the Chicago area, Denckla moved to Camden a few years ago from Whitefish, Mo. Since arriving on the Midcoast, he has explored a lifelong interest in film photography and was looking for a way to use the medium in a context that would contribute to the community.

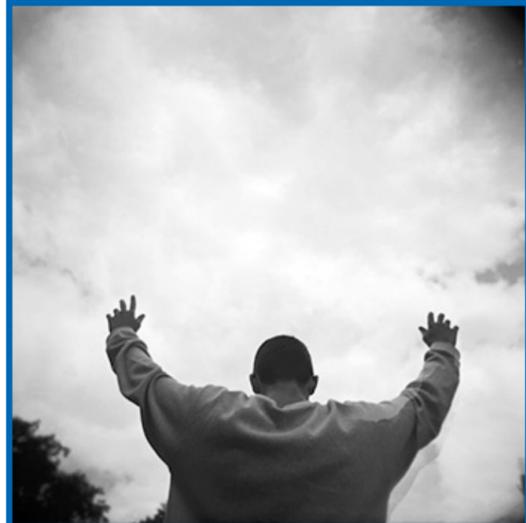
"I have always connected to kids and I really wanted to work with both. I don't remember the exact spark that started it all, but once I got the idea I never looked back," he said.

The idea was to introduce film photography to young people as a vehicle of creative expression. Denckla pursued several avenues; the one that seemed to lead somewhere was with Maine Medical Center's Maine Children's Cancer Program.

"The idea was to use photography to tap into their creativity — a way to get them to focus on something other than their disease as the main issue in their lives," Denckla explained.

After securing major funding for the project from The Jessie Fund and the Sam L. Cohen Foundation, cameras from Freestyle Photographic Supplies in California and an offer of a big discount on developing and printing from Maine Coast Photo & Digital, Denckla's Young Photographers Initiative — YPI KIDS — embarked on its first project.

"Almost everyone I told about the project was as enthusiastic or more so than I was about it. It has been an unbelievably exciting and



Deanna Stephan chose her grandfather for her portrait subject.



Deanna Stephan, 19

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Andrew Cilea, 10

Border portrait photos by Paul Denckla



Nicole Woodward, 19



Joshua Conley photographed his oncologist.



Josh Conley, 11



Courtney McIntire, 17



Rebecca Hardy, 15

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rewarding journey," said Denckla.

The name of "Project: Tomorrow" was deliberately chosen. The survival rate for youth cancer is high, but what it takes to achieve that "tomorrow" is a "today" that takes patients away from the normal and often involves pain. The nine children whom Denckla worked with, some of whom will attend Friday's opening, range in age from 9 to 19. All were, at the time the photography took place early last summer, either going through cancer treatment or in the early, well-observed days thereafter.

"From the very beginning there was never a discouraging word from any of these kids, not one," said Denckla, adding he had expected "the other shoe" to drop at some point. Instead, "they were this mix of joy, determination, sass, spunk, resilience, humor and so much more."

That attitude is revealed in the photos and accompanying written comments of the

show. The project's assignment was to take a portrait of someone "who is or who will be important in your life tomorrow." In addition to the photographic portraits, each child wrote a descriptive essay about his or her subject and the reasons for choosing that particular person. The subjects, in turn, wrote about their experience of being chosen and photographed. All these elements will be part of the show at Carver Hill.

Also part of the show are black-and-white triptych portraits of each child taken by Denckla. This aspect of the show went through a real transformation. Denckla had taken traditional "posterity" portraits of the young photographers, but when he began to look through the images they were turning in, he felt he had missed the boat. So he did another shoot, this time using hats as props and encouraging his subjects to have some fun with them. The results are very lively, more in keeping with the upbeat energy the

children seemed to exude.

"I called the new group of images 'Attitude,' because that was the single word that describes what these kids were all about," said Denckla.

The choice of camera for "Project: Tomorrow" also helped capture the energy of those wielding them. Denckla gave each participant a Holga camera, beloved of film enthusiasts for the quirky unpredictability of the images it produces. Manufactured in China, the Holga is plastic, including the lens, which can lead to various image distortions and the occasional light leak. It has one shutter speed and two f-stops.

"The Holga was always the idea. It's a film camera, medium format, the most basic camera one can get, and that was important to me, that their tool be the most basic camera," he said.

The children were given a one-day tutorial by the Bakery Photographic Collective

and then allotted about a month to complete their assignments. Each was given a single roll of film, although a few needed another for one reason or another. They produced images that exceeded Denckla's expectations.

"I was excited about what I might get, but they really took me by surprise," said Denckla.

Another pleasant surprise has been the level of support for the show, which will run at Carver Hill through Feb. 24. The local showing came about via a friendly conversation with gallery co-owner Jana Halwick.

"We were discussing what I was doing. The gallery has a specific interest in having shows that give something back to the community and recognize cultural efforts," Denckla said.

After "Project: Tomorrow" concludes, its participants will be given copies of both

their work and the portraits taken by Denckla. The University of Pennsylvania and Harvard alum, a board member of MidCoast Habitat for Humanity who is seldom seen without his chocolate lab Nina, is shopping the idea around to other medical facilities, specifically in Philadelphia and Boston.

"If I find a place that wants to do it, I'll just go there and camp out," he said.

After Friday evening's opening, the show may be seen from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mondays, Wednesdays, Thursdays and Friday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturdays and 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Sundays at Carver Hill Gallery. Admission is free; donations to Maine Children's Cancer Program are encouraged.

For more information on the project, visit [www.ypikids.com](http://www.ypikids.com).

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