



Students test their cameras on the first day of class at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Photography workshops click with inner-city teens

Model program makes its U.S. debut in Los Angeles

By Martha Groves

When Alberto Castañeda rolled up for the first day of the Fredric Roberts Photography Workshop near downtown Los Angeles, the underside of his skateboard displayed his mantra in yellow bubble letters: SCHOOL SUCKS.

The 17-year-old Angeleno's reputation as a talented rebel had preceded him. "You're mine," Roberts told him, putting Castañeda on notice that he was watching and that he expected big things.

A former Wall Street executive turned award-winning photog and philanthropist, Roberts, 73, has expected – and gotten – big things from participants of his workshops since 2011, when he held the first one in the picturesque but direly poor district of Udaipur in western India.

Since then, he and a rotating gaggle of top-notch photographer-instructors have put on clinics for young people elsewhere in India and in other Third World or developing countries – Bhutan, Nicaragua, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The weeklong Los Angeles session, Jan. 4 to 10, was the first on U.S. soil.

"Seven days. Twenty students. A new language that will last a lifetime."

That's how Roberts' website, fredricrobertsworkshops.org, bills the workshops.

During each clinic, Roberts and the instructors offer students a crash course in techniques. The students then spend days taking and editing photos with the aim of telling eye-catching stories.

Roberts' wish is to give these young people a voice through photography – and to instill in them a passion for the visual art form.

"This is not a photography class," Roberts told Castañeda and a handful of other participants who arrived Jan. 3 for pre-workshop technical training at the Heart of Los Angeles community center near MacArthur and Lafayette parks. "It's an empowerment class."

To plan the clinics, Roberts and his team collaborate with non-governmental organizations and charities. The groups find participants and help set the week's agenda by choosing parks, villages, gardens, museums, classrooms and other photogenic places where students may practice their new craft.

HOLA, a nonprofit group that provides academic, arts and sports programs for underserved youth, selected the Los Angeles participants and set aside a room for instruction and editing (all of which is done on speedy laptop computers).

The Los Angeles County Museum of Art also pitched in, with meeting space, photo ops galore and venues for the graduation ceremony and the final exhibition of the students' work. Participants attended classes in the museum's Study Center for Photography and Works on Paper, for which Roberts' foundation provided the principal funding in 2014.

Each workshop typically trains a group of 20 high school-age students – half girls, half boys. Half hail from rural areas and half from cities. The Los Angeles group consisted of 24 inner-city kids, with more girls than boys. Two female HOLA staff members joined them.

At 9 a.m. on Jan. 4, the full group gathered at LACMA. Instructors handed out professional-grade loaner cameras. Then, the adults

sought to scare the living daylight out of the kids, admonishing them to keep tabs on every piece of equipment and to follow all of the workshop rules.

It was just as well no one noticed that the face of Castañeda's cellphone was smashed (from a skateboarding incident).

Each Canon Rebel T5 camera came with a standard zoom lens (with image-stabilizing technology), a charger, a memory card and a case.

"The lens cap is the No. 1 thing you're going to lose," said Will Van Beckum, 27, a graduate student in fine arts at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. He has also taught at the Santa Fe Photographic Workshops, which is where Roberts found him.

"We are going to be shooting in manual mode all week," said Mike Sakas, a Hong Kong-based photographer. "The rule is never, ever delete a photo."

That was a Roberts edict, aimed at ensuring that the kids would learn from mistakes and benefit from happy accidents.

Roberts warned the participants to gird for "a massive injection of technicality."

They were soon hearing an onslaught of terms: aperture, metering, ISO, shutter speed. They learned about harsh light vs. soft light, early vs. late light, warm vs. cool light. Instructional booklets offered primers on how to approach photography: the rule of thirds, repetition, layers, centering, leading lines.

Wendy Walsh, 51, a former documentary photographer who lives in Rochester, N.Y., and was the week's lead instructor, made it sound easy.

"We're painting with light this week," Walsh said. She discussed the importance of shutter speed, describing it as "the time element of letting light into your camera."



Workshop participants photograph sculptures and plants in LACMA's garden.



Instructor Arthur Ollman edits photos shot by members of the red group.

"A second is a long time when you're a photographer," she explained. "You're going to start thinking about time in a whole new way."

Arthur Ollman, 68, an emeritus professor at San Diego State University and founding director of the Museum of Photographic Arts in San Diego, backed her up.

"How long do you think you can stay still holding your camera?" he said. "People cannot hold still longer than maybe 1/15 of a second." To steady a

camera, he told them, spread your legs (the tripod effect) and hold your elbows in.

Everyone seemed to take in the information without feeling frustrated or overwhelmed.

"These guys are so incredibly sponge-like," Sakas said. Even on that first day, the participants (some of whom had previously taken photo classes at HOLA or in school) were picking up on the relationship between exposure time and the blurring or freezing of action and between aperture and depth of field.

After the morning tutorial, students and instructors fanned out to photograph whatever piqued their interest on the LACMA grounds and in the museum galleries. Many gravitated to "Urban Light," the late artist Chris Burden's al fresco installation of more than 200 vintage streetlights. Others photographed plants, sculptures, curved stairways or a girl turning cartwheels near Jesús Rafael Soto's "Penetrable," an outdoor artwork with an ever-shifting curtain of yellow plastic tubes. Instructors stood by to offer advice or tech support.

Queen Essilfie, 17, sat on a wall by the Burden light poles, assessing possibilities. What appealed to her?

"I'm not sure yet," said the senior at Ramon C. Cortines School of Visual and Performing Arts. "I'm looking for anything that's interesting. Most of the time it's shadows."

After 90 minutes of roaming the LACMA campus, the students returned to the study center and broke in to four groups (green, blue, red, gold). They loaded their photos into Lightroom, an Adobe program that helps photographers organize, edit and share pictures.

"I like your aesthetic," Roberts told Castañeda as the green group perused his 173 shots, including several taken from various angles at the light poles. "But you're getting too many flares."

Minding Roberts' advice to "kill your babies," the group whittled Castañeda's 173 images to 28, then 11, then 5, then 3. Then they repeated the process with the group's five other members. It took hours.

Sean Teegarden, a Los Angeles-based freelance photographer, admired the kids' boldness. "They're experimenting quite well," he said. "They want to shoot people, but they need to get closer."

Unlike the young people in his workshops, Roberts had a privileged upbringing, in Great Neck, N.Y. His father owned a

company that manufactured home furnishings, and his mother taught primary school students in the inner city. Like many well-to-do New Yorkers, they escaped to Florida in the winter and sent their son to summer camp in Maine.

As a teen, Roberts chose to go away to boarding school—the Hill School in Pottstown, Pa. He then went to Yale University (where Bob Woodward, who would go on to fame and fortune for his Watergate reporting, was a classmate).

Roberts' parents wanted him to become a doctor, but he chose a career on Wall Street. After graduating from Yale, he took a job at Lehman Bros., a prominent investment bank. In 1980 he went out on his own with F.M. Roberts & Co., based in Los Angeles.

The financial excesses of the 1980s soured him on Wall Street. "I was doing fine," he said, "but I was depressed."

In 1986, opportunity knocked. A friend in the travel business suggested that Roberts join a group journeying to Tibet. Roberts carved out six weeks, adding Thailand and China. He walked into Bel Air Camera and bought an expensive Canon 35mm with lenses and "a million roles of slide film."

"I must have had a huge bull's-eye on me that said: 'Schmuck with a credit card,'" he recalled. On the plane to Bangkok, he spent an inordinate amount of time figuring out where to put the battery.

He shot pictures – lots and lots of pictures. It turned out he had a good eye.

When he returned, he heard about a UCLA Extension photography course. After seeing his photos, the husband-and-wife instructors suggested he study with them. He took his first four-hour lesson, then went home to some bad news: Someone had stolen all of his money.

At that point, "I'm not thinking about photography," he said. "I'm thinking of ways to kill myself." He threw his camera and all of his photos into a closet and didn't look at them for 14 years.

He helped some of the other investors recoup their losses and worked to rebuild his own wealth. Wall Street bigs were so impressed with his handling of the fraud that they elected him chairman of the National Assn. of Securities Dealers.

Throughout this period, he devoted time and money to the arts. Starting in 1989, he built the Spotlight Awards, a scholarship and training program at the Los Angeles Music Center for high school students interested in careers in the arts. He also raised money to build Walt Disney Concert Hall.

By 2000, he felt financially secure enough to retire. A friend reminded him about those mountains of slides in his closet.

Roberts, who lives in Mandeville Canyon, found his way to the Santa Fe Photographic Workshops, where instructors were impressed by the "beginner's" work. (Roberts is now on the advisory board.)

Soon, his photos began appearing in galleries. He published three books: "Humanitas," "Humanitas II" and "Humanitas III." For these volumes, Roberts trained his lens on

individuals, families and communities in India and elsewhere in South Asia, including the Himalayas, to show beauty amid squalor, joy amid deprivation.

Of "Humanitas II: The People of Gujarat," a *New York Times* book reviewer wrote: "Roberts, a former investment banker, wouldn't argue with the notion that the villagers he spent five years photographing could use a bit of princely largesse, but his work is based on the conviction – amply demonstrated in vibrant images of sadhus and cowherds, women harvesting wheat and little girls dancing in the dust – that these lives are spiritually wealthy."

Photography is not making Roberts rich, he said, but it is providing "psychic income."

Workshop participants in other countries often must clear hurdles unimaginable here. In Hyderabad, India, a father beat up his wife because she let their daughter attend a workshop. Elsewhere, a brother threatened his sister because she participated. After seeing her work, he apologized and now encourages her photography. In Tajikistan, students traveled 17 hours by truck.

Sakas, the Hong Kong-based freelancer, recalled a participant in Hyderabad whose father was a bricklayer's assistant. "Now the kid shoots photos for the local papers," Sakas said. "Maybe some [L.A.] kid will come out of this with that little bump they need."

Anthony M. Brown, HOLA's executive director, emailed Roberts soon after the workshop to express his thanks. "You have provided a truly transformative experience for the students, and history, I'm sure,

will show that this workshop 'made all the difference' for a few if not all."

Instructors overseas can find themselves in the midst of a Tower of Babel. In Tajikistan, translators simultaneously decoded lessons about shutter speed in Russian and Tajik, a language similar to Farsi. In Kyrgyzstan, participants spoke Russian and Kyrgyz. In India, translators attempted to explain the nuances of lighting in Hindi and a Garasia dialect.

Probably the most rudimentary workshop venue was in Nicaragua, where the team stayed in a rainforest lodge.

When each workshop ends, Roberts donates four cameras plus photo software so that participants can continue to develop their skills. He also works with local partners to train staff and find photographers to mentor the novices. Students continue to submit work on a private website.

The next workshops will be in Toronto in March 2016 and Lisbon in September 2016, with the possible additions of Mongolia and Cuba.

In May 2016, a collection of students' photographs will be exhibited at the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto.

Over the week, through rain and shine, the Los Angeles students turned their lenses on the gritty neighborhood around HOLA to chronicle a skate park, a tamale maker, a Guatemalan bakery, a vintage print shop, a specialty paper store, a medical clinic, street vendors, a gardening project, a basketball clinic and music classes at HOLA.

They shot in tight quarters (the tamale maker's kitchen). They lay on the floor to get a new angle on young violinists and stood behind a cellist with fabulous hair. They caught skateboarders flying off their boards. They mugged for one another while digging holes to plant a garden.

By week's end, the 24 students and two HOLA staffers had taken nearly 32,000 photos. The instructors distilled them down to a few slide shows that they presented at graduation. Each student, with help from peers and instructors, got to pick one photo – his or her best of the week. Samy's Camera, a workshop supporter, printed those for the exhibition. Each had a place of honor on the display shelves in the Study Center, where white walls and warm hardwood floors set them off to advantage.

Castañeda's was a moody shot on an overcast day of commuters climbing the stairs of the Westlake/MacArthur Park subway station. It featured leading lines and reflections. On Jan. 10, graduation day, he posed proudly in front of the image in the LACMA Study Center, flanked by his Mexican immigrant parents and other relatives.

In recent years, Castañeda acknowledged, he has often been a trial to his parents. "High school was good until junior year," he said. "Then I didn't go to school."

He'd stay out late skating and partying and then argue with his mother. His parents kicked him out; he ran away.

He now attends a continuation school in Koreatown and said he is "getting back on track." In his workshop application, he said he would bring to the photography workshop "determination, persistence and motivation."

He is self-aware. "People learn in different ways," he said. "I'm a visual, hands-on learner."

At the ceremony, Castañeda, ever the rebel, wore a mint-green T-shirt with a photo of a beautiful, large-breasted woman showing off her cleavage.

As he sat in an auditorium chair waiting for his turn to cross the stage and collect his certificate, his knees bounced with anticipation. His smile said much: Maybe this sort of school—

this hands-on, creative week of becoming fluent in a visual language—didn't suck after all. Castañeda vowed, then and there, to his parents and Roberts that he would graduate from high school this year.

From the stage, Walsh lavished praise on the entire group for embracing the workshop as a chance to view their neighborhood through a new lens.



Castaneda (in green) poses with family members and friends at the LACMA Study Center exhibition on graduation day. Instructor Sean Teegarden is at left.

"They learned to really see," she said. "I got to see fabulous friendships just happen. I saw people empowered. They had to think, figure it out, problem-solve and make choices."

Roberts thanked the parents for entrusting him and the other instructors with their children. He told them, with attention-getting hyperbole, about the goal for his workshops: "By the end of the week, we want a Green Beret unit of total killers. We want kids who can change their lives, their neighborhoods, their world."

Of the students, he added: "They were focused, open, emotional, creative. They are our friends permanently. They are real professional photographers."



Fred Roberts (center) with 24 workshop participants and professional instructors as they take a moment for a group photo at HOLA headquarters near MacArthur Park in Los Angeles.