

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

DEVIN ALLEN INTERVIEW
A CHOICE OF WEAPONS: INSPIRED BY GORDON PARKS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Devin Allen
Photographer
February 21, 2020
Interviewed by John Maggio
Total Running Time: 1 hour 38 minutes and 22 seconds

START TC: 01:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Devin Allen
Photographer

Background

01:00:13:06

DEVIN ALLEN:

My family came from North Carolina. I have a really big family. I can trace my family back, probably a hundred years. We actually went to an anniversary where one of my ancestors started a church a hundred years ago in North Carolina. So, I got to go back and see some of the family. A lot of my family came from North Carolina, some people stayed in Baltimore, some of the family continued on to New Jersey and some of the family went straight to

New York, and my grandma was like the beacon and she keeps everyone connected, you know, from all those different generations.

Growing up in Baltimore

01:00:51:20

DEVIN ALLEN:

I'm third generation. My grandma moved up here as a teenager, so my mom was born here and then I was born here. West Baltimore is awesome, I love it. Younger days it was just fun. You know, and um, my mom always kept me in a lot of activities, kept me busy. I have a lot of cousins. I'm the only one in this weird age demographic where everybody was older or younger than me so I had a lot of older cousins and younger cousins.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

Coming up. So, life was pretty simple until like-- it got complicated the older I got here. Um, I lost like my first friend at like sixteen, seventeen due to gun violence, and that kind of like changed my world. So like, my younger years growing up was just full of playing basketball, hanging with my friends, you know, doing stuff that kids do. But then I had that-- you know, the world reality snuck up on me really fast and it kind of changed my outlook on the city, growing up as a young teenager going into my early twenties.

Beautiful Ghetto

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DEVIN ALLEN:

The way that the name of the book came along, it was just like-- I had a guy named Mitchell Duneier who was working on a book. So, he was working on a book about the ghetto. He saw my work and the stuff I've been doing, you know, just documenting everyday life in Baltimore up until like the uprising and everything that happened, and um he reached out. You know, and I'm a person where like if you want to come and know about my work, you have to come to Baltimore. It's a really hard place to explain because people only know about *The Wire*, *The Corner*, *Homicide: Life on the Street*. You know, people like Carmelo Anthony. A lot of people know much about the city and our crime rate. So, he uh-- he's a professor at Princeton so him and some other scholars came to Baltimore. I had a show at the Reginald F. Lewis Museum, that was my first solo exhibition. And, you know, he was working on his book about the ghetto.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

So it's um, I believe it's about the five hundred years of the ghetto, you know, starting in Venice in Italy and then being with the Venetians and the Jews and then coming over here to Baltimore. So, he was just trying to get a better understanding of what, you know, the ghetto meant to me, you know, and at the end of the day I think the word "ghetto" gets used as like a verb and all

these different things, but when you really just-- it's just people, minorities, in one space and that's what Baltimore is for me.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

I didn't interact with people outside of, you know, my culture until I was like nineteen, twenty, when I started to work in corporate America and stuff like that. So--but when you think about the ghetto you think about poverty, you think about all these different things, you know, that encompass a ghetto but at the same time it's a sense of community and love you only can get in these spaces, and I think that's a beautiful thing. Growing up for me, it was tough, you know, like losing friends to the streets or getting caught up in certain situations with police, but it's still, you know, those cookouts, those block parties, or just sitting on the stoop with my friends. It's only a certain sense of community and joy you get in the ghetto and those places.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

Um, when you're just zipping by, you're missing the resilience of my community. The fact that, despite everything we've gone through, you know, from crack, heroin, the murder rate, lead paint poisoning, all these things, we still find a way to tick and keep going. You know, like my mom, growing up for her, you know, she was in her young adult age when crack hit. She talks about how she would see a person with a good job one day and then three weeks later, no job, teeth gone, and these are her peers. She'd watch, you know, and

they get caught up in that cycle. My generation is the byproduct of No Child Left Behind, you know, the *D.A.R.E* program, post-crack, you know, so a lot of my friends grew up with lead paint poisoning, or they'd label them crack babies, you know. So, it's just like, I have a different perspective on it.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

But, you know, it's just the fact that people always find a way, if it's not done in one generation it's the next generation. I'm the first male in my family with a high school diploma, but where I'm at in life, I'm changing the trajectory of males in my family. So, it's like, Baltimore just has this thing where you can't stop us. You can knock us down, but we always get up and find a way.

Influence from Gordon Parks

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DEVIN ALLEN:

I never knew any photographers. I think the closest thing I knew to a photographer was my grandmother. And I didn't realize she was a photographer, but my entire life is documented by my grandmother. She carries around like the little disposables. Even to this day, every cookout, everything documented in our family. So, I have family albums and that's the closest thing I knew to- to photography. I didn't understand how powerful it was until I came across, you know, the work of Gordon Parks and because I

always felt like I never had a voice, you know. I always-- it was always-- our story it just felt like it was always from a lens of a different place. From people that didn't really quite understand us. When I turn on the news, or anything, you know, even watching some of my peers who have been murdered and end up on the news, the lens, they don't understand who these people were.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

So, when I found photography, it was something that I was just interested in, but I knew nothing about it. You know, I started off as a poet first. And I just remember googling "famous Black photographers" and Gordon Parks' work started popping up. And I'm just going through it and going through it and I'm just like, "wow", it's just-- I never-- because we didn't know anything about Gordon, they didn't teach us about him in school. Which I think is really crazy when you really think about it. But looking at his work, and how he was able to document, like you said, humanized people, even in poverty, you know, showing those positive moments that you really have to embed yourself, and open up your heart to. You know, and that's why, you know with Gordon it's like, it was the photography-- he was an amazing photographer, but his heart is what made it. You can feel like you know him and his subjects through the photography, which a lot of people are not able to do. You know, and he did that very well and I settled to do the same thing. I just felt like Baltimore has always been in a negative light, you know, and it's so easy to show those things because those are things that sell: pain brings money. You

know, I want to show those intimate moments that everyone misses, and things that I see every single day.

Creative work

01:07:06:14

DEVIN ALLEN:

I never really had a mind of my own. I wasn't like a leader or anything growing up, I was like a follower. You know, and my mom raised me, you know, where a lot of my peers, a lot of my friends didn't have like a... like a active parent. So, I had friends that don't have like that stable household like I did. I have a really close-knit family so even when I would be led astray, they would always reel me back in that's probably why I'm still alive to this day. My mother always allowed me to explore who I was younger, but when I got a little bit older and I got to see other things, I kind of lost myself. You know, and I've found that I've, you know, when I talk to a lot of people, when I go back and think about my childhood, and the way the school system is, the school system is not really set up for you to really explore who you are and find your true self or find your true path in life.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

So, a lot of the things that I was in love with, like drawing and sketching as a kid, I tucked those things away, you know I tucked those things away so I could, you know, conform and be like everyone else that I was around. You

know, and then eventually, I always felt like I had something special but I didn't know what it was. I had a friend, we'd play basketball together, we were total opposites. He was a straight-A student, always in class, you know-- you know, wanted to go to the army, you know, most likely to succeed. And I was like, didn't apply myself, intelligent but failed, you know, never could make the basketball team because I was always failing. Or I was always fighting and getting suspended, you know, because I had a short temper. But he actually went to the army. Me, my- my path was a little different. I had to make a lot of mistakes, you know, to get to where I am now. I was in the streets a lot. So, I was hustling and selling drugs with my peers.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

That's what I wanted to do because that's what I saw and what I looked up to. When I see my friends that are like sixteen and seventeen-year-olds coming to school in BMWs and driving Mercedes at twenty-one. And I'm just like, I want-- that's what I want, that instant gratification that I can get all these tangible things right then and there to prove something to myself, I guess. But my friend came back, you know, and I had a daughter super young, too and that's what really changed me, I had a daughter at nineteen. You know, and she kind of inspired me to want to be larger than life because my dad wasn't really around, he was in and out, so I wanted to be like an amazing dad. And around the same time, my friend was getting into poetry and that's who really got me to that. And I started writing, but I didn't really like performing.

I didn't feel comfortable in my own skin yet, so I didn't like to do public speaking and stuff like that. So, I found-- like I loved human interaction and around the same time Instagram just came out.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

And you know, I just wanted to take pictures at this point to promote our poetry and stuff like that, and then it just-- I just fell in love with it from then and I just-- I didn't even have a camera, I actually had my friend's camera and he had to call me and say, "Yo, can I have my camera back?" You know, and I had to set out and find a way to get my own.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

What I did was, I sat on it for a little while because I didn't know what to do. You know, I didn't really know any artists, like the closest thing I had to artists were like a couple of my friends were comedians, some poets, and stuff like that, tattoo artists. Art was something that really wasn't ever really offered to a lot of us in our school system. You know, it's like literally, our class was like drawing boxes and then do a little 3D, dumb shit that make you hate art in the first place and made it boring. So, you know, I just was watching a lot of YouTube and I would see like these interviews from Gordon Parks and around the time, I wanted to really pursue art so it was just crazy how things work. I got laid off from a job I was at for three years, I was like pushing

papers and I was dying in this cubicle and I was like, "This cannot be the rest of my life."

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DEVIN ALLEN:

And I went and got a job working with kids, young adults with autism intellectual disabilities. I would work from 12 at night to 8 in the morning so I can just worry about pursuing this art all day, and I told my mother that I wanted to be an artist and she would help me with my daughter so I can go pursue these things and I just would be up all day watching YouTube and I found myself... like no one ever told me how expensive like books was so I would go to Barnes and Nobles and have all of these photography books out and I would just sit and look at...

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DEVIN ALLEN:

Gordon's work if it was him shooting his stuff in Harlem or shooting Muhammad Ali...some of my favorite stuff you know just looking at his wide array of work you know and shooting Vogue and I was like, "So, I can shoot all of these things too," you know, and I just start watching YouTube on how to work cameras, you know, learning about ISO and aperture and all of these things and just reading books, and then I was like, "Imma get me a camera." Like I'm gonna do this-- these things," and I thought Gordon Parks was like the coolest cause he would have his little pipe, hair would be slicked back...

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DEVIN ALLEN:

You know, just seeing him like in person riding around with his family just like, the stuff-- how he was able to touch the community and how he was able to connect people, you know, and just like listen to his interviews and stuff like that and I remember going to Best Buy trying to buy a camera and no one told me how expensive photography was. I'm thinking I'm about to spend like 2-300 dollars and I'm ready to go. Nope. By the time I got to the cash register I was like 2,000 in and I was like what, and that's just like not the most expensive camera. It was just like a camera with a kit lens, a bag, some SD cards.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

You know and the whole spiel and I was like, "I can't afford this." So, I did what I did. I called my grandmother and I called her like "Grandma, what you doing?" and she's like "You want something. You never call me just to see how I'm doing. You want something". And I was like "Do you...I know you have a Best Buy credit card cause you just got that washer machine. Is there any room? I want to be a photographer. She's like "You really want to do it?" And at this time, I sort of went through this transition where I tried to like be a party promoter. I had like a whole mixtape that me and my friend...I tried to rap. No one will ever hear this mixtape ever again.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

You know I played this for myself and was like, “This is horrible. I can’t be a rapper. This is not for me.” So, I tried everything, but I was just like, “Photography is my thing, Grandma. Help me get this camera.” And I got my first camera in 2013 and I remember getting it and just taking pictures all day. Just taking pictures and taking pictures...it was just for fun. I didn’t even know how to really work the camera. I’m just shooting in auto mode and I’m like “Why is this picture too bright? Why is the picture this...” and I’m going back to YouTube like, “Oh. That’s what ISO is for. Oh, I need to close the lens that’s aperture. That’s that little thing? Alright, let’s do it. Then from that... It put a distance between me and a lot of my childhood friends.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

So, a lot of my friends didn’t understand art and understand how passionate I was about it, so I got made fun of. They’re like, “You can’t be an artist. You gotta go to like one of those art institutes or something. You gotta go to like MICA. You can’t do it.” You know, because it was too outlandish because they didn’t know, you know, and it’s just like I’m going to do it if ya’ll have my support or not. So, from there I start looking for other artists to hang with that understood my goals and what I wanted to do because the things that I was dreaming of were too outlandish for my peers.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

And both my best friends-- One of my best friends was murdered. He was shot 7 times in front of his house... right in front of his grandmother's house. So, like the next day I went to pay my respects to him, and he was kind of angry at me because I had changed and evolved so much, and at the time, you know, I grew up really fast in that- in that space, so like they were older than me so by the time I was just getting into art I was like 24-25, you know, and it's like... "it's too late. It's too late. You start art when you go to the art-- you gotta go to the BMA. You gotta do all of this other stuff. it's too late for you." And I'm like, "No, I can do it."

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DEVIN ALLEN:

You know, and he-- and they didn't believe in me so it kind of like put some distance between us. So, I never got to, like, reconcile that or we didn't so he got shot...he got murdered and the next day me and my other best friend went to the house to pay our respects to his mom and everything else, and I remember hugging my best friend and leaving and at the time I had made some other friends that were like tattooist. They would teach me about Basquiat, they would teach me about-- they would help me buy photography books, they gave me like a studio to just like come in and do shoots in. So, I was just like completely immersed in this- this world of art that I was falling in love with, and I remember leaving and then my best friend was murdered. So, I lost both of my best friends in one weekend and the only reason why I wasn't there because all I wanted to do was take pictures and that's when I

knew like this is my thing...this is the universe...this is God telling me this is your thing... you run with it. And I just been running with it ever since.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

I lost my- my best friend Derek...Derek Lee, we called him "DeDe". He was shot 7 times in front of his house and then the very next day I went to pay respects to his mom and my other best friend Casper, his name was Chris, we called him Casper. I left and then he was shot in the head a block over. So I lost both of them in like-- one was murdered Friday night and one was murdered Saturday night.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

I definitely think the path that I was going down-- like I said, if I didn't have my daughter, I probably would have continued down that path. You know, and my mom did everything, you know-- a lot of stuff that I was subjecting myself to was personal choices, you know, cause my mom was amazing. You know, and it's funny how moms they let you stray away a little bit, but I-- she always had faith in me. She let me stray, and the whole time I thought I was being sneaky. She knew what I was doing the entire time. She was like "I knew." You know, "But I had to let you make your own mistakes. You're an adult." You know, like, "You had to make those mistakes." But if I didn't find art, I probably would-- art really did save my life.

Similarities with Gordon Parks

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DEVIN ALLEN:

I wa- I wasn't aware of it at first, but the more I studied his work, and I would watch like some of his-- you know, cause when you first look at his work, you know, you put him-- automatically you put him on a pedestal. You just think-- you know, people come to these like- like to judge people based off of their work, and they put them on this pedestal already, so but to find out, you know, that he worked on like a steel mill and like and did all of these things and, you know, where he really comes from like...in Baltimore we call it "Getting it out the mud". Some people say you come from the bottom. In Baltimore we say, "Getting it out the mud". And he really got it out the mud and really is a self-taught artist. To find out that, you know, he directed *Shaft* (1971) or finding out that, you know, he was able to write a book and have it turned into a film and to actually work on the music. You know, like that stuff was unheard of to know that... you know, I didn't learn any of this. I only imagine if he was like a part of my curriculum in high school. If I would've found out about him younger...I probably would have been a photographer a long time ago but just to know like his story, and I'm still finding out stuff about him as I study his work and as I meet some of his peers. Not only is the work so good, but it's the people that he touched.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

How he mentored so many people and touched so many people is which blows me away that out of-- through his journey he had the time to really mentor some of the my other favorite photographers that I've been able to met and hear stories you know about how Gordon touched them and changed them and helped them in their own careers just...it's everything, you know, and I've kind of set my career-- looked at his key points in his career to help make some of the decisions that I make today.

The camera as a 'weapon'

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DEVIN ALLEN:

I took pictures of everything. I didn't understand how important it was. I just looked at it as like making art, something that brings me joy, something that helps me deal with my social anxiety and depression from all of the things that I've been through. So, it started off as just a personal journey, you know, trying to understand who I am digesting my community and my own trauma, you know, and it started off as a personal journey but as I, you know, got deep into my career and I was asked to start, you know, I was asked to document like a protest, and I never really understood the power until I was able to like document protests and document peers, you know, or people I've documented and passed away, you know, and the images or what they are used for and was able to tell these stories, and that's when I really started realizing how powerful an image can be. You know, it can make or break a

person. It can change a person's life, or it can destroy that person's life but at the same time, you're locking in history, and you're become a part of it. And that's when I really started to realize how important my imagery was to my city.

Finding a voice

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DEVIN ALLEN:

I wanted to do it all. Like— like when I look at Gordon's work, my friend D. Watkins gave me one of his books and it was just like a collection of multiple things that he's shot. You know, um, and it was like looking at his transition from how he can shoot, you know...like that nitty gritty journalism that I love that really embedding in a situation to tell a story to going to shoot *Vogue* and shoot sports in between and shooting everything else in between. Amazing storyteller. So, my work started off— I would just — I was shooting for anybody who would hit me up in the city. I was— His *Vogue* work and how he maintained that journalism looking feel... So I was shooting models, but I was also shooting music videos for rappers, but I carried my camera with me every single day. So I was this— street photography became my favorite thing because you can't recreate that. You know, you're const— I'm not looking for anything but it's things that are just in front of me and I fell in love with just being in the moment. You know, when I'm doing street photography, it's just me, my camera, and the world.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

I found myself shooting models, but more so street photography and that was-- and from that my peers... I start getting the support from the peers because what I would do is with Instagram, I would make like cheap prints. I would use like Snap Fish, and I was like-- and I was like struggling like real starving artist. I was like living with my mom, trying to raise my daughter while making \$12 an hour, trying to pay a car note and child support and my bills, but my mom always had my back, so I was able to do it. But any time I would get an extra couple of dollars, I would hop on the Megabus, go to New York, just roam New York, take pictures.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

You know, and then I started making friends in New York and I would just go pop up at like random art shows, and I would give out free prints and I would just write my Instagram name on it and give it to people in the city and people would just start following me. So post 2015, I had a mass of 10,000 followers on, um, Instagram and on Twitter and then-- you know, social media is like-- it makes the world a lot smaller and a lot-- little bit more easier to navigate so I would just like take pictures and put them out. I wouldn't think nothing of it.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

So then my work flow really came shooting... Wi-Fi camera. Shooting, Wi-Fi, straight to the phone 'cause I didn't have a laptop at the time, so I just would Wi-Fi it to my phone and then just upload, you know. And then eventually I got like a-- found a MacBook at like a pawn shop and then I learned-- taught myself Lightroom and Photoshop. So I start experimenting with that stuff so everything up until then was just experimenting, trying to figure out my voice and what I wanted my art to stand for.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

You know, and then I found myself not liking Photoshop 'cause I'm not a big fan of... I understand that world of Photoshop and point, but it's nothing like journalism to me like telling stories so I just lean towards raw photography, not a lot of editing, not a lot of post. And I remember coming up on a Canon Ae-1. It was like the first film camera that I bought, and then I didn't know anything about film so I started looking at film and then I would just shoot with expired film that I would...you know, some of my friends would give me, and then I fell in love with black and white.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

And it's just something about black and white when you drain the image out of color, you're forcing people--you're controlling that narrative a little bit more. I know when I look at an image, for me, and a lot of people look, we digest imagery, we look at the colors, we look at the outfits, the people, but

when you drain-- I feel like when you drain that color out, you really get that, um, that raw motion. You're looking straight into the person's eyes or whatever it is I want to show you. That's when I fell in love with black and white and I was like ok, I think I'm coming into my own now.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

So, when it came down to 2015 post Freddie Gray, Mike Brown passed away. I shot some protests for that and that's when I almost quit. I almost quit because I-- my first protest was ever, one of my friends went to MICA and her boyfriend is from Palestine. He asked me to shoot a protest for Palestine and I was like "Where is Palestine? I don't know anything about that. My world is small. I know West Baltimore, I know East Baltimore, I know South Baltimore, I know nothing else. Where's Palestine again?" Then he's like "But you're an amazing photographer please, it would mean a lot to me." So, he gave me the spiel on what's going on and it was a collaboration between students from MICA that were from Palestine but also, I believe from--family was from Israel too which was kind of like a collaboration which is, um, now that I know a little bit more it's really a big deal. You know, um... So I went to shoot it and everything and then I went to like give him the images and he upload it and tagged me and people are like these photos are just amazing.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

And I'm just like people are blown away like people are tweeting me talking about the photography putting them in tears, seeing these two opposite sides work together in a protest, and I'm just like-- that's when I really start understanding. So, when Mike Brown died, I was like I wanna do this for my community because I've been subjected to police brutality. I've had a friend murdered by police officers. I've been wrongfully accused by police officers in Baltimore City. So I was like-- that's when I felt like that moral obligation as an artist I gotta reflect the times and the things that are going on around me.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

And I remember shooting the stuff and trying to send it to some paper, and I couldn't even get a response and I'm like "Yo, my photography must suck". I almost quit at that point and that was in 2014.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

You know when you-- it's like, you live in this bubble and it's like you have--we have our own issues of course, like my--most of my traumas come from friends being murdered in my community, and that's what I deal with. You know, so growing up I never thought I would have to go through a protest. You know, like it's something that for me growing up was just like, Oh that stuff; civil rights, Black Panthers, you know, stuff you read about. You know, and then to be thrust into a protest and actually being in one and feeling that energy and understanding you have a voice cause that what I feel

protesting is, it helps you like to activate yourself. You know, it gives you a sense of like ownership and pride to stand for something, and I was just like I have to document this. And when I start documenting the Mike Brown protest, we were standing with Ferguson. That's when I really realized, like, the camera really is a weapon because the work was able to show, you know, people that Baltimore is standing with you, but also allowing people see their self and others through a photograph.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

You know you can feel that emotion is a part of history. That's when I really started understanding what my work is for.

Social media

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DEVIN ALLEN:

Yeah, I think it's important, you know, because we-- like you said, Gordon. Amazing photography at *Life*, but he only could-- the photography was powerful enough but even still that narrative was still slightly controlled, you know, and it's always been filtered through a White lens. Even now when you think about a lot of the time some of the photographers, you know, that wasn't going and documenting a lot of these things and these plights, it's always been from the outside looking in... never from the inside looking out and controlling that narrative. So now, you know, you look at these times and

it's like all these different platforms from Twitter to Instagram to Facebook. Now you don't-- you don't really need those publications to get your voice heard. You know, and I think that's the difference between everything that happened you know when you think about the Civil Rights Movement or Black Panther Party... how, you know, those narratives were still being shaped and controlled by the powers that be that control the larger platforms.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

Even when you think about people like Malcolm X, you know, or Martin Luther King, he had-- they had-- they were the outlet for so many people you know. We lost Malcolm and we lost MLK, you gotta think about that was so damaging because they spoke for so many people with their very large platforms. But it was very rad. You had your Stokely Carmichaels and your Huey P.s but they were like a walking Instagram for everybody else, you know, but then you fast forward now and everybody can get their words, their photography and their pictures out. That's what I think what makes everything so different now is the fact that a lot of us-- you know, back then we never had a voice. We would have had to look to our leaders to get how we felt across to the rest of the world to the bigger platforms, but now you can build your own platform, you know, and tell and control the narrative from how you want to see from your own vantage point.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

You know, and that's what I think um... I only can imagine if Gordon Parks was alive now what he would be able to do with an Instagram or, you know, launch his own blog, you know, to talk about these serious issues.

Creative control

01:27:51:12

DEVIN ALLEN:

Like for me I don't like naming my images, you know, 'cause I don't like people to... I feel like if I name it... so a lot of my work is untitled. I get forced to like "We need you to name this". And I'm like "Alright, cool. Imma come up with like a name. Imma just name it whatever street it's on" or something like that but I'm really... I'm not a big writer. You know I like to convey how I feel and everything through my images. So, what I try to do is I don't really look at myself as like a journalist even though I'm classified like as journalist, documentarian... I like to just relate conversation. You know, I like to create-- not to create a narrative for someone else. I want you to look at my imagery and I want you to feel something. I want you to feel what I feel but I want you to come to your own conclusion about what you feel, and I think that's very important.

01:28:37:23

DEVIN ALLEN:

I think all aspects of photography of his, you know-- Of photography photographed with the essay or you know just a straight photograph but

what I was doing, definitely with Freddie Gray, I was just trying to get the work out, and I wanted you to just see it from my perspective, but I wanted you to feel something from it. And I just think that black and white allowed me to kind of lead you, not force you, but kind of lead you to what I want you to look at what I want you to see. You know, so if I'm trying to show you pain I'ma show it to you, but I want you to digest that image on your own without me creating a narrative for you. So a lot of the times, and I got a lot of backlash for it like other journalists, cause it's not the traditional way, it's not this and it's not that and it's like well, I'm not traditional. I didn't go to school for it. I'm doing what I want to do for my community, and you know that's why you know a lot of people was like, "Well you're not really explaining anything," and it's just like it doesn't matter what street it's on or where it's at. A Black man died, and this is what's going on in my community. Feel something. Let's talk about it.

01:29:39:11

DEVIN ALLEN:

A lot of people love to just come to their own narrative. No one likes to have conversations these days, and I think that's where the issue is. I love to be a conversation starter and that's what I want my images to do. Get people talking and get people-- I want you to get riled up. I want you to feel anger. I want you to feel my pain, no but I want you to have a conversation about it.

Gordon Parks' work

01:30:02:04

DEVIN ALLEN:

When I first started seeing-- Because I was only googling will only get you but... google different now, but when like. In 2015, google was... 2014, 2013, google would only give you popular stuff so it was really hard to find some of that -- some of Gordon's work online, but it's like when I came across like a lot of his colored images-- even down to like the kid with the bee. You know, like stuff... His color was just like... so vibrant. It still had the same impact as black and white, but it felt like it was just so warming even though it was like... Like the image is like-- I think it was a colored only store and the lady with her daughter and they're like looking like the reflection from the glass and the pop of color... you know it's beautiful. You know, and... But it still gives me the same feeling when I look at his work. It's like you gotta sit-- you gotta sit and digest it cause there's so much going on.

01:30:59:10

DEVIN ALLEN:

You know, Gordon is really good-- and then the way he even frames stuff. It's like really, really, really good you know and he's so... I don't think I'm there yet as a photographer, but he's able to like do this thing where even now in the other images where kids up against a gate and they have like the water guns and stuff like that, and it's like a Black kid and White kid and there just like hanging out and it's this like-- he makes this thing where like it's so warming and welcoming even though there are so many issues to be talked about in

the imagery. I just feel like it's like only something Gordon-- I've seen from Gordon. He can take something that's so negative but when you first digest it and look at it... before you start to unpack everything, it's like super warming and it just blows you away. I think he was really good at even things that might have been uncomfortable for-- as a Black person to capture. He's able to, you know, make it digestible without being angry.

01:31:59:01

DEVIN ALLEN:

It makes you really sit and want to talk about it and you know where there's some imagery you can see coming from different spaces where you just are automatically are angry. That the image angers you and you don't even wanna look at it again. But he has this thing where it's like the way he frames stuff, it draws you in and it makes you wanna have a conversation. You know, like I'm still-- I'm still finding work of Gordon's that I'm still like I can't stop looking at or... I just don't know how it makes me feel because I just feel so many things.

Street photography

01:32:37:21

DEVIN ALLEN:

You know, like when I think about me being a street photographer people are like "Do you have a studio? Do you have this..." and it's like "The streets is my studio." You know, that's-- I'm from the streets. You know, so it's like, for

me-- What is that line? The world is your oyster type thing. The streets is mines, you know, like a lot of times when I'm out documenting I don't-- I don't-- some people are like "I'm going to go take images today." And it's just like no I just always got a camera with me. You know I could be going to go get a beer. I could be going to just to holla at my aunt or going to see my grandma, and I've got my camera with me. I just always got it with me. The streets is my studio so it's like that's where I feel most comfortable when I'm documenting. You know, I just love capturing those moments. You know, and then a lot of the places, a lot of imagery that people love from, um-- the community I'm from it, so a lot of the people I'm documenting, I probably know their aunts or their big brother, or their cousin because Baltimore is so small.

01:33:29:16

DEVIN ALLEN:

So when people meet me, even with my level of success as an artist, and I'm still so accessible, people wanted me to take their picture. It got to that point now. So, a lot of people see my images and you can-- you see the love in it because these are people that I love, you know. But when people think about the streets, they always think about something negative, but there's only a certain type of love you get from the streets here in Baltimore. I think in any hood or ghetto when you get like a certain sense of love it feels good, you know so. I know a lot of street photographers are a lot different from me, you know, like they can shoot anywhere. It's hard for me to shoot anywhere

else. You know, I just love shooting in Baltimore. That's why people are like "You don't shoot anywhere else?" It's like, Yeah, I'm like I spent a lot of time in Oakland, like I feel like Oakland is like a second home cause I spent so much time there. I shoot there, too, but it's just like I need more time there to feel comfortable. You know, and I have-- Comin from where I come from, you know, I have a certain level of respect from people in my community so when I go to other communities, I have a certain level of respect. So, it's really hard to shoot anywhere else.

01:34:28:18

DEVIN ALLEN:

That's why when it comes to the street photography and when it comes to Baltimore, like, Baltimore is-- Baltimore is my oyster. You know, I'm just starting to expand my work and shooting outside of Baltimore and that's something that I'm working towards for my future of my career is being able to shoot anywhere. But it's just like Baltimore I feel connected to because I've been here all my life. I hate-- I hate when people parachute in my community, and even though I'm Black, I still have respect for other Black communities. I'm not gonna document something that I don't understand, you know.

Connecting with people

01:35:04:18

DEVIN ALLEN:

I look at... Like the work he did...

01:35:07:22

DEVIN ALLEN:

American Gothic and I look at-- like that series and that image, and how he was able to connect with people and I think that's what actually makes a good photographer. You know, it's not so much the camera or the tool, but it's like your heart and how you're able to... not infiltrate but make a person feel comfortable and make them want to feel vulnerable. Because when you think about it they're giving an essence of-- part of their life to you and allow you to come into their space, and it's something that when I first started I didn't fully understand, but lately I've been able to understand it. You know, like, even when I go to Oakland I reach out to 2 people that are really from the community so I can know what are the issues here. What is going on? Doing my research and that's something that a lot of people don't talk about with Gordon. Gordon did his research.

01:36:02:03

DEVIN ALLEN:

He embedded himself there, old school. You know, the world is a lot faster now with photography. You don't have that time because, you know, the world's moving so fast, and everybody is-- but Gordon really took that time to really connect with subject, which I really really respected cause a lot of people don't actually really care but you could tell Gordon cared. You know, there's this one story, when I first got-- when I first got the cover *Time*

Magazine, and I met this guy named Robert Houston who's from East Baltimore and his work is phenomenal, and it reminds me of Gordon's. He's most known for shooting the Poor People's Campaign but guess who gave him that opportunity? Who taught him the ropes? It was Gordon. He talks about how... he's telling me this story about how like he was in college and he was like "This is so boring I can't do this". And he was like, he hopped on a train and went to New York and snuck into Gordon's office, and so Gordon was looking at his work and he said "Ok, your work is pretty good."

01:37:01:15

DEVIN ALLEN:

Gordon tells him, "You don't got a lot of pictures of people. You don't like people or something?" and Robert Houston said, "I can live with or without them". And Gordon says, "Well if you want to be in this business, you better take them" And that story from Robert Houston, um, changed how I look at people when I photograph them and it's like in this business, with this art form and this medium, it's an obligation to tell these stories of-- because we are... we become the conduits for people to connect through the photography and it's important. It's vital and it's crazy when you really think about with Gordon, how these stories that he told still hold true today. When you look at the story with the gangs, you know, that's still going on till this day the stuff that they're going on still stands strong today, and people are still documenting.

01:36:59:01

DEVIN ALLEN:

That says a lot that he was definitely ahead of his time. But... moving forward, for me and what I've learned from Gordon, is photography a lot of time is like even though an image is quick... it's quick, but the time you put in with that person you can tell in the image. You can tell if a person just came in and snapped and kept it moving. But if you can see it in their eyes, it was a real human connection right there. You can tell that in almost everything that-- even Muhammad Ali and Gordon, that relationship that was able to build that amount of time that Gordon spent with Ali you can tell that it was genuine, and that it was real, and it was authentic, and that's something that some of the greats are able to do and I think that was one thing that Gordon did really well.

Freddie Gray

01:38:54:10

DEVIN ALLEN:

Um, I didn't know Freddie personally, but me and Freddie Gray actually had a lot of common friends. So, it's like, we literally missed each other by like not a lot cause I knew a lot of people that knew him that I hung with. And I had some friends that actually lived in the same project as him, too.

01:39:11:14

DEVIN ALLEN:

Freddie Gray, he was um... supposedly he had a knife on him. Police tried to stop him, he tried to run. Slammed him, they broke his leg and then the rest of them threw him in the back of a paddy wagon. The paddy wagon made some stops and by the time-- he never made it to jail. He ended up in the hospital and his spine was broken in multiple places, and they said that it's all from a rough ride, which I've been on rough rides and... it don't turn out that way.

01:39:44:21

DEVIN ALLEN:

It's real common it's like either they put the zip ties on you or the cuffs real, real tight to the point where you lose circulation in your hands, and they just throw you in the van. You're not like strapped in and they just like ride around trying to lock other people too but as you're riding around, they are driving pretty crazy. So you're hitting like all the potholes everything. You're just like bouncing around in the back. I've been on one, but I didn't like- I didn't break anything. Sore yeah, my arms by the time I got... to the bookings to get booked my hands are completely... can't feel my fingers and stuff like that, but I've never heard anyone dying from a rough ride.

01:40:21:21

DEVIN ALLEN:

It's like, just like a metal long seat and it's just like they'll arrive-- and some vans are split down the middle and they'll put like the woman on one side

and the men on the other so like... You might get arrested, let's say-- let's say you get arrested at like 12 pm, you know, and they might ride around with you all day till like 10:00 at night just in the back of the paddy. Can you imagine? Just riding around, you know, while they go try to arrest more people and then they take ya'll to get booked and then you go see the commissioner and that's when you find out if you have a bail or not, or you're going upstairs to sit or whatever the case may be.

01:40:58:05

DEVIN ALLEN:

Yeah, it's normal. It's normal. That's when a lot of people like "Well, he could have died. They probably threw him in there incorrectly and stuff like that." It's normal. If you've been arrested in Baltimore city, you've most likely been on a rough ride at least once.

01:41:11:20

DEVIN ALLEN:

He was in the hospital for a while and then he passed away. So I-- the video was like uploaded to like YouTube and somebody sent me the video, so a lot of people was getting the video through text messages and group texts. So, like... Kevin Moore recorded one angle and then Kianna recorded the other angle. Me and Kianna actually went to high school together and you actually hear her screaming in the video saying "His leg broke. His fucking leg is broke." You can hear her screaming and that's when they drag him off and you could hear Freddie screaming about his leg. You can see in the video it

was like slightly twisted and I got the video in a text message... In a group text between some of my friends.

01:41:51:20

DEVIN ALLEN:

It's 3 videos, actually. You know, one is like really hard to find, they took it down and blocked it but the 1 that's still up, you can see the police drag--they already got the cuffs on him. You can see them dragging him and you can see his foot is like twisted crazy. You can tell that it's broke or dislocated or something. They're dragging him and you can hear him just screaming, screaming. They're dragging him to throw him in the paddy wagon, and then someone else is following the paddy wagon and now there's another video of them making an extra stop before they even get him down to bookings, and that's where people think that the police actually beat him up or did whatever they did to him to actually break his back and mess his spine all up and everything else.

01:42:32:09

DEVIN ALLEN:

I think they tried to say he had a knife on him, possibly had drugs. They always bring up that he had some priors, you know, he had been in contact with the police before. But that's how we were raised. Even if you're not up to anything, your first initial reaction is to avoid the police. You don't like... I was raised like that. Like when my mom-- when I first got my driver's license and my first car, if the police get behind you, just pull over. You know, avoid them.

You know, like that's just how it is. So of course if the police go to stop you, your first reaction is just to run cause sometimes if you even-- it's been times-- I'll never forget I was pulled over by police, they got upset because they didn't find nothing, so they just put something on me. You know, and that's just... That's just... it's like a game of cat and mouse. But your first reaction is always to avoid the police if you can.

01:43:26:02

DEVIN ALLEN:

People was already gathering once the story broke before he even passed away. That's one thing that is different from a lot of other places like Ferguson and everything else. Baltimore, like I said earlier, we have a certain type of spirit. We not waitin' to react. We reacted pretty fast compared, you know, like literally once the video acted, people already started mobilizing, you know, and in the community that Freddie Gray is from, you know, it's a real popular neighborhood. The Sand-Town Winchester area, Gilmor Homes, you know he was really well known and loved in his community. So, the reaction was instant, even before he passed away.

01:44:04:19

DEVIN ALLEN:

I came out maybe once he passed away. Once he passed away. You know, because... I was-- cause like I said, I always got my camera on me, I'm always outside. But then once my peers we all start mob-- texting each other like when they start doing the rallies and stuff it was like alright, we going you

know, so we just– we just went. You either drove down or you caught a Uber. You know like this our community and it’s just like... I knew I had an art form, I knew I had my camera like when you think about the stuff-- my friend, Sean Gamble was murdered by police, but I felt back then I didn’t have no voice. It’s just like my friend was killed by police and there’s nothing I can do. If you think about or hearing about people like Tyrone West who were killed by Baltimore city police, felt like helpless but it was like, I knew how my city was and the energy that was like kind of vibrating it was like I need to control this narrative. No one can tell this story better than me, so I just took to the streets.

01:45:05:06

DEVIN ALLEN:

A lot of my peers knew Freddie, so a lot of the time when Freddie’s-- his peers or cousins and family and friends would lead protests, I had mutual friends in the neighborhood that would just tell me. Like “Bro, protest. We’re going out city hard today or we starting at Gilmor Homes today...”. Or we going here or we going there. You know, so it’s just like I would pick up some of my home boys and we would just go together or meet each other and we would just mobilize. And I just would go out and just like start taking images.

01:45:32:22

DEVIN ALLEN:

I was running on a lot of adrenaline. I really wasn’t really thinking. Now that I think about it, there was like a couple of instances when I got too close and I

was like “Ahh, maybe I shouldn’t be this close” but I just-- I had my little Fuji and my 35 mm and I was just ready to go. And my biggest thing is, Baltimore is always shown in a negative light. I wanted to, you know, play that... not like the devil's advocate, but I wanted to show like everything. I didn’t wanna just show like... I knew the news was going to show one side and then, you know, my community was going to show one side. I want to show everything. I wanna come in as that person showing the raw essence of what’s going on in my community from a person that’s from the community, you know, but still have the integrity of a person that’s like-- I’m not gonna lie to you and act like everything is positive right now. Majority of it was, but I wanted you to see the truth for what it is.

Photographing the protest

01:46:29:02

DEVIN ALLEN:

I- my style is... I’m very big on lines. And I like framing stuff really well, but going back to like Gordon. Feeling the energy, being in the moment and really... I’m not gonna say people watching, but being able to feel the energy and know what a person’s about to do beforehand. I’m really good at that. Like predicting what’s about to happen. You know, so a lot of time when I’m shooting, I tell a lot of people that I’m not like looking and wondering my eyes. I’m feeling a lot, I’m feeling emotion, so I would just, you know, let my heart guide.

01:47:00:17

DEVIN ALLEN:

So it's just like from... what I tell all photographers when I teach is like your camera should be an extension of you. So, when my cameras in my hand, I'm constantly... you know, even when I'm not taking pictures I'm just always playing with my camera, so I know how to frame my shots. I know what I'm doing, I know what lens I need, I know everything and I'm a person that I travel really light cause I don't like changing lenses. It takes away from my-- my speed. So, my camera is already set to black and white with my-- with the preset and then I have my phone activated so I can shoot and then upload, and then just keep going about my day. And my goal was to move faster than the media to get the work out faster than them, you know, and then at the time like I said I had 10,000 followers on Instagram and maybe like 8,000 on Twitter, and I was like, "Imma just let this-- Imma put this stuff out in the world. I'm not worried about no publications." I'm not gonna-- Like when I shot Mike Brown, try to get this stuff out there. I'm just gonna use my own social media, and I made like a post and Imma dedicate my page to Freddie Gray and everything that I was going to be uploading from now on was going on around this subject.

01:48:08:20

DEVIN ALLEN:

When everything happened, it happened so fast and I didn't really think nothing of it, you know, and I was already documenting it. So I was getting

quite a few likes and it was getting a little bit attraction, but you know a lot of media wasn't on the ground yet even though Freddie had passed away it was all local. You know you wouldn't see a lot of journalists out and stuff like that. Even in my community you didn't see a lot of photographers out. And um... when everything really hit the fan is when we were down in Camden Yards, and the real big protest... we marched from Gilmore Homes down to City Hall, and all the police were worried about was the fact that we had an Orioles game, which is our local-- it's our baseball team so all the police were stationed down the stadium just worrying about the fans and making sure we didn't mess up the game.

01:48:52:11

DEVIN ALLEN:

And we made our way down and I just was documenting and uploading. And when I took the *Time* cover, I had my friend with me. I'm not gonna say his name, but we were walking and we were shooting and I just remember when we were getting around the corner, and the thing is with Baltimore is like we-- we were marching for Freddie, but you've seen people with, you know, hoodies on or "I can't breathe"...shirts and stuff like that. Like it was-- it was for Freddie, but it was for everyone who has been, you know, subjected to police brutality up until that point. So, as we were marching I just remember some fans at the Orioles game at the bars across were actually calling us the "N" word, they were calling us monkeys and all types of stuff, and they start throwing food at us and laughing, and that's what actually started everything

because now you're dealing with this energy... you're just adding more... the last drop in this bucket before it overflows.

01:49:50:00

DEVIN ALLEN:

And I remember the younger... you know and for me, like I said, Baltimore is one of them places where we don't really interact. It's not like a New York City where it's like a melting pot where you are interacting with all of these different people. For the most part, a lot of us don't interact with people outside of our community until we get older, or we venture out. But I have friends who have never left West Baltimore or let alone went to East Baltimore, friends that have never interacted with anyone outside of their culture. So now you are getting tossed in this element. You've got kids that are like 18, 17, and 16. You know young 20's getting called the "N" word and monkeys when the word "N Word" has always been a word that we use as a term of endearment to say friend or, you know, we changed the narrative of that word amongst our- the younger generation. So, to hear it come from White lips for the first time it's just like wow! What year is this? And then a fight broke out and it just was Oriole fans... I can't remember what team they were playing, fighting the kids and you had this weird thing where the kids...if you had on Orioles or any type of baseball apparel, you were getting jumped.

01:50:55:09

DEVIN ALLEN:

And then it spread and then they saw the police cars and start stomping the police cars, and I just remember this guy running past me, and I'm documenting everything. Glass flying everywhere. I'm just capturing everything, and this guy runs past me. The whole time the police had been blocking us in. So the whole they stomping the police cars, they blocked us in on Camden. So, you couldn't go down the street or go up the street. They were blocking us in downtown. So if your car was like... if you were driving downtown you were stuck. You know, like one lady tried to drive through the crowd. They told her to turn the car off you're gonna be here a while and she tried to drive through. Brand new Mercedes they stomped the whole car out. Like, it was just like a movie. Is this really going on right now? And this guy runs past me with this red bandana around his face and he throws something. And I'm a person where... I learned how to shoot. I never could afford like the best of the best equipment.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

You know, so... but luckily enough I only shoot with small SD cards because I couldn't afford like a 62 GB or 32 GB. So, I usually have like 1 or 2 16 gigs, but from shooting with film I had learned how to pick my shots more strategically, and also just to save space on my SD card. So, I'm not shooting a lot of frames. I'm very particular. You know, so I see him run and I turn around and I'm framing up my shot, and I wait a second. I'm like-- I was going to take a picture of him, but then I'm like Imma let him run out of

frame. Because when I'm shooting, I'm not thinking but I'm... it's like muscle relaxes, but I'm thinking at the same time, and I just snapped the picture. I don't think nothing of it. I looked down at the image and I'm like ok got it and I go to move, and the police are like charging in front of me. I had to hop over this gate and then just... I remember just going to Twitter and Instagram uploading the image while all of this was going on saying "We're sick and tired."

01:52:53:04

DEVIN ALLEN:

I keep going. I like shimmy up a light pole, take another image, and I'm just running around taking images. And my mom is watching my daughter and my mom called me like "Are you ok? I heard it's getting kinda crazy down there. I need you to make your way home. Come get your daughter. She's getting on my nerves." And I'm like "Alright we about to walk to Gilmor. I'm fine." I wasn't about to walk anywhere. It was just too much going on. So, I'm in between protestors, police full on ride gear... protestors. And they had... Boxed us in so you couldn't go anywhere and I remember still snapping pictures after pictures. And my mother called me again so I'm snapping and I'm on the phone with my mother and she said "Where are you at?" and I'm like "I'm walking to the car now. I told you we marched from Gilmor Hall. My car is all the way up there. I have to walk." She's like, "You sure you walking to your car?" The whole time she's watching CNN and at this point CNN is on the

ground, everything is about what's going on downtown. Usually, I like a afro, I have on a bright pink t-shirt and a bright baby blue jean jacket.

01:53:52:15

DEVIN ALLEN:

She can see me in between and she get to cussing me out. "Why you lying? Why you so close?" and she gets super worried and I'm like "Mom like I got it. I'm fine." I don't feel-- I never felt like I was in danger because once again I'm on the ground, but I got a lot of peers that know me. I got a lot of home boys and a lot of home girls that are watching me, you know, because they're my friend. A lot of us grew up together. And I was like, "I'm fine. I'm safe." You know, and I take my pictures. I go home. I go to sleep with 10,000 followers.

01:54:22:00

DEVIN ALLEN:

I wake up with 20,000. The BBC called me, and I don't know what to do. I do an interview with them and the next thing I know I'm... it's that Monday... and once again, like I said, this is my community and-- and one thing about my photography I'm very respectful. I try to be very respectful of what I document, how I document depending on what I'm working on. And one thing I don't do is take pictures at people's funerals. I know how it feel to lose people. You know I'm 31 years old. I lost count. I forget people. I know for sure I can count at least 30-40 people that I've grown up with who I've known that have been murdered and I know how important it is to grieve in those moments. So I did not attend Freddie Gray's funeral at all. I feel like it's

disrespectful and I would be pissed if- if it was a family member of mine and people come to take pictures or people try to interview me coming out of me burying a loved one.

01:55:21:02

DEVIN ALLEN:

So that Monday I do the interview-- that Monday I do the interview with BBC and as everything unfolds by Mondawmin mall after the funeral of Freddie Gray where the police meet the students from Frederick Douglass High School, and they shut down public transportation. My mom talks to my grandmother cause where I grew up at is like down the street. So my grandma was about to drive through this stuff, and my mother's like "You cannot go that way. Like go around it like don't go up Gwynns Falls." And like my mom wanted me to like stay in the house. I had to work that night, but then when everything else unfolds it's like... this is my community, though. You know, like this-- I got friends and you know people that's like family to me that live in that area so that like-- That's the only day I didn't take pictures.

01:56:07:17

DEVIN ALLEN:

I went out and checked on my friends and sometimes--and this is something that I live by and tell myself like as a photographer, as like a person. I always say to me when I teach like my kids. It's not always about-- sometimes it's about the pictures you don't take that makes you a good photographer, and

it's like something that I stand by that sometimes it's better to put the camera down and just be a human being right now, and not, you know get caught up in that.

01:56:34:13

DEVIN ALLEN:

So when I went out there, and it just was like everything-- the CVS was on fire and all that stuff was going on, but, you know, I didn't take any pictures. I just checked on my friends to make sure everybody was ok. And so, I came back out the next morning and then started documenting like the landscape and everything else now, and like, which a lot of people know is like yeah, small section of Baltimore was subject to you know the riots and everything, but guess who came out and start cleaning up? The community. You know, through all that anger, you saw the community come together and I tried to show that in the photography. The prayer circles-- school was shut down so they start having cookouts, you know, town Hall meetings. So, it got to the point where only if you were from Baltimore you would know where all this stuff is going on at because the only thing that the main news was focused on was the burnt down CVS and what was going on and where the National Guard was stationed at.

01:57:28:11

DEVIN ALLEN:

But I knew that someone was cleaning up that alley and all of the stuff that was going on so I was documenting, documenting. And around that time, I get

like a blocked call come through and I think it's like a bill collector or something, and then I'm like they keep calling and I'm like oh it must be a girl that's mad. I done pissed some girl I dated, off and I'm like I'm not dealing with this right now, and so I kept hanging up and hanging up, and they keep calling. So I originally answered like "Who is this?" and he was like "This is Olivier from *Time* Magazine. I wanted to talk to Devin Allen about his work in Baltimore." They must have gotten my number from like the BBC or something and I'm like "Yeah, this is Devin." And they're like "Well, this is *Time* and we wanna talk about you." And I'm like "I'm currently on the ground right now.

01:58:04:03

DEVIN ALLEN:

I can call you after the ground." He was like "No. Tell me what's going on." So I'm like literally on the phone with Olivea from *Time* at the time, and he was working on a Lightbox blog and I'm shooting. I'm telling him what's happening and mind you, at this time, I've been a photographer a couple—like 2.5 years. I don't know anything about copyrights. I don't know anything about anything. He said, "We want to look at some of your images." So, I sent him over like a WeTransfer file of some images and they loved it. "They wanna do a blog on you." So, they're like "What publication are you with?" And I'm like, "I'm not with no publication". And they're like "Huh? So you don't work for anybody?" and I'm like "No. I'm just documenting this on my own." And he's like "So you're not contracted with or freelancing for nobody?"

And he's like, "Oh, let me call you back." And then they called back, and he was like "Where are you from?" And I'm like, "I'm from Baltimore." I was like, "You must didn't read the BBC article." And they were like "No. Are you really from West Baltimore?" And I'm like "Yes, born and raised." And they was like blown away. And I told them my story and we did a blog from it, and then I didn't think nothing of it and I was like "Please don't change the narrative of my work. Like, please.

01:59:07:13

DEVIN ALLEN:

And they was like "No" and they didn't and I was like super happy from that and just kept shooting, you know. I was out for 3 weeks straight, you know, documenting. A lot of people think the uprising was like one day and it was like all 2015, some of 2016. A lot of us was stuck in those moments cause it was super depressing to see your city like that. So I just kept documenting and like 2 days goes past. I get another call from *Time*, it's Paul Moakley, the Chief Editor, and he's like, "Devin, the work is phenomenal. I can't believe you've only been doing photography for 2.5 years. The work is so good. Can you send me these images?" I sent him some more images and he's like "So, what's going on now?" and I'm like... I think I was leaving like a prayer circle or something and I was going to like a town hall meeting and he was like "How do you know all this stuff is going on?" and I was like "I'm from West Baltimore. I just know where everything is because these are my friends and we just know, you know, we all are really popular in the city." So, next thing I

know ABC is calling and all of these people are like what's going on, on the ground?

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DEVIN ALLEN:

Because they're missing this stuff because they're so-- all y'all worried about is CVS, y'all reporting-- everything is the same, but I'm just like there's a prayer circle going on down the street, there's a block party going on right here, it's a town hall where all the basketball coaches and the team leaders and people that's powerful in the community. And then Paul Moakley called me and said, "Devin how does it feel to have a full spread in *Time*?" and I was like "What?" I didn't know like... What are you talking about? And he was like "But this one image is powerful. We already have a cover, but I wanna fight for this." And I was just like whatever like I'm just happy that the imagery is going into *Time*, so this is real imagery from real Baltimore and really from the ground and I go to sleep. I wake up and I gotta get my guys ready with autism with intellectual disabilities because I'm still working there. So I'm helping them get dressed and ready for school, helping them take they showers and stuff like that so they can go to their program, and I just see all these like tweets.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

And I'm like, what is going on on my page? And I finally get to like refresh it and get to the bottom, and it says amateur photographer from West

Baltimore snags the cover of *Time* Magazine, and I just burst out in tears and I call my mother and she burst out in tears and my whole family is just crying and I went from like 20,000 followers on Instagram to like 40,000 and then from there *Time* was like “We need you to do an interview down here. We need you to do an interview here.” And I’m like at City Hall still trying to shoot and document this stuff while doing interviews, and next thing I know I’m going to New York with Yahoo and doing the interview about the work and still documenting and everything. It just happened like so, so fast.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

I didn’t know I was getting paid. I just wanted it to get out into the world and it did. You know, um, I was... Huffington Post sent a journalist to hang with me... like, cause they wanted to know what was really going on. And it felt good to like actually have journalists come and writers come to be with me to help shape the narrative, you know, like me and a lot of my peers, we were the ones that dubbed it uprising not riots. We don’t say riots we say uprising, but there was a lot of us and a lot of other community leaders that said that’s what we’re going to call it. We are going to control this narrative. And in that moment, that’s for the first time I understood what Gordon was talking about. That the camera is a real weapon and controlling that narrative is vital and that’s when I realized how powerful I am with a camera in my hand.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

Growing up in this age like we hate the news because we don't trust it. So it's like-- you know, it's funny cause everybody is like, "Oh fake news," because of Trump, everything they saying is fake news but it's always been fake news to us cause we, once again, never controlled our own narrative definitely in Baltimore where people are always... you know, everywhere I go it's just *Wire*, *Wire*, *Wire* you know, and it's like Baltimore has so many different layers to it. So, my biggest thing is with *Time* and what I appreciate about them, they didn't take advantage of me which I think is very rare that they could have just took the work and like put it out. I wasn't nobody at the time. Could you imagine the headache trying to get *Time* to like take my work now? No, they-- they worked with me, they taught me the ropes, they taught me about copyrights. Paul really took his time to like really flesh out what was really going on in Baltimore, even down to like even when I started like a little like, um... little short series in between called *The Heart of the City* like doing portraits of the people from Gilmore Homes and Pennsylvania Avenue and my peers.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

They published that, you know, and just talking about the work and I think they really respected the fact that I am self-taught and I come from Baltimore, and they were super adamant about protecting that narrative and really telling the real story. So even when they interviewed me for blog, it was more so not just about Freddie but also about me and the story of-- of Baltimore,

which I really- really was happy about. And I always-- and ever since then I always put my work out first. Even if I shoot for a publication, I stand my ground on that and I will turn down a job really fast. You know, because Gordon had to fight for those things and I just think that me being a part of his legacy and then being a Gordon Parks Fellow it's important that I keep that same humility and the same authenticity being a part of his legacy I think it's one of the most important things.

Navigating a new career

02:04:31:23

DEVIN ALLEN:

It's funny like I rarely... the journalism world is really, really, really weird because there's a lot of nepotism in it. The same editors work with the same photographers. Even in Baltimore like they would do a story like on Baltimore but they hire like a photographer that's not from here and they would take some of the most cold images and I'm just like... you call yourself a journalist. You know, I'll never forget, New York Times did an article about the crime rate and they hired like a photographer from like Waldorf or something like-- a place I never heard of in Maryland and you're talking about the fact that Baltimore has 300 and something murders and maybe in that year I lost 6 friends. So my friends are a part of that- that percentage that you're about to document and instead of like diving in and really doing what a real journalist does, you shoot from out your car. I can tell it from a

vantage point on North Avenue and there's a picture of a vacant car wash and it just has a flyer on it that says "Baltimore cease fire."

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DEVIN ALLEN:

You know because we do these ceasefires to try to stop the crime rate, and it's like instead of you doing your research and going to actually document the person who started the Baltimore Ceasefire is Erricka Bridgeford who just so happens to be my kindergarten teacher. That's how small Baltimore is. And it's like that's not real journalism to me. That's cold and that's-- and that's what happens now in the journalism world, you know, they-- it's nepotism. They hire the same people the editor, you know, it's lazy. Lazy journalism, you know, like.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

So for me I find myself creating the work on my own, you know, and then going to do exhibitions and putting the work out on my own. You know, and if somebody find it, they like it, then we can talk. But I don't like people controlling the narrative of our images definitely when it comes to my community. So I found myself not freelancing so much, and there's not a lot of publications in Baltimore. People like to write about Baltimore, but usually they just send somebody from New York that they already know to come down here and you can tell that they not from here cause their images are

just cold and it's not connected to the people because they not really doing their research.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

And then I found that even struggling with my own work when I-- like I said, I've been in Baltimore all my life. The furthest I ever went was North Carolina to see family, New York, and maybe like Miami once, but I spent my entire life here. You know, so even when I start traveling myself and being able to go to places like Salzburg, Austria and I was with some photographers and we snuck into the train station where people were traveling from Syria to escape what was going on there trying to get to Germany and I went in cause I wanted-- at this point where I'm coming off the *Time* cover, but I understand how powerful photography is now and I start feeling like I had a voice and I just wanted to explore different things with photography.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

And that's when I realized what type of photographer I am. You know, I have a-- I always had a big heart but I got into the train station and I start seeing these families, and I start photographing them and once again I put the camera down, ended up playing soccer with the kids and letting the kids play with my camera. One because I didn't have enough time to spend with them to really flush out those stories I really needed to and I didn't feel like I was equipped to tell that story. You know, and I have respect for them cause I

know how it feels to be from a place and-- where people like to tell you what you are all the time and not tell your true story and it's true essence, and it's very hurtful and demeaning and it's heartbreaking when you really think about it. So, it's like... when it comes to my work, I try to stick to things that I understand, you know, and then sometimes I might not understand something, I do my research.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

You know, I worked on a story for the Opioid Crisis where I had the opportunity-- the story was never released because one, humility. I'm not about to sit here, work on the Opioid Crisis, and give you the typical drug needle in the arm story. No, I want to dive into his life, you know, I spent so much time with this guy. I was going to see his family and getting those intimate moments or seeing what he do in his down time as he fights to stay clean and battle. Going to his meetings with his counselor and stuff like that, you know, and documenting that stuff and telling the overarching story. Those are stories that I wanna tell because everybody has a story and I try to just make sure that I lead in with a good heart and understanding that this person is opening up to me and I respect that.

Relationships with photographed subjects

02:08:51:12

DEVIN ALLEN:

Sometimes you can get too close, and it becomes detrimental, but I just think that that's just human nature to care, you know, when you document these things and sometimes you can feel like you're taking advantage of them and knowing that you maybe be getting paid, or this might get you an award or this might launch your career even higher. And it's like you move on to the next story and it affects you and you think about these people, you know, like... that's why I like with the story with like what he did for the kid in Brazil and his give back component of his life is always trying to lead with his heart and give back as much as he can. Even if it didn't work out, but just leading with your good foot forward, and he's one of the reasons why, you know, I started my youth program and why I started teaching inner city kids photography and I started giving out cameras for free.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

And yeah, sometimes I might not have been financially available to do the best that I could and sometimes things have put me in binds, but as long as I just lead with the... with... that I know that it's coming from a place of purity. That it's something that I want to do because I care and I'm not doing it for validation or anything. I'm probably always continue doing those things, but at the same time when you think about Gordon Parks and his legacy, even if it didn't work out just, just look at the amount of people and lives that... That never even met him that he changed.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

You know, like he changed my life and I never even met him and now I sit here as a fellowship, you know, where the Gordon Parks Foundation gave me a \$10,000 grant to teach inner city kids with autism and intellectual disabilities photography and how to digest the world. You know, like that's what it's all about for me and I think I can even speak on Gordon's behalf. It's like yes we love the work; this is our passion, but it's also about the people you touch and how we change their lives using this art form to bring people together, and, you know, and even, you know, plan like small space and helping people evolve and become better. You know, that's— that's all we want to do as artists is to help shape the world and make the world better I guess.

Youth program

02:11:01:16

DEVIN ALLEN:

Yeah. So basically, after the *Time* cover, I was on the ground, and I saw so many kids, and I think about the impact I was able to have where I became the point person for *Time* and *Huffington Post* and ABC and like all of these publications were reaching out to me, you know, CNN and these— they have their own photographers that they have on payrolls or freelancing, but they're reaching out to me to get the other side of Baltimore, and I only can imagine, what if it was like 10 more Devin Allens? You know, that were really

from Baltimore that really understood it. What we could accomplish, you probably could have just locked down the whole city and then like documented everything, you know.

02:11:39:00

DEVIN ALLEN:

So, I was like Imma start teaching inner city kids photography, and you know, around that time I had Instagram had reached out to me. Once again, Paul Moakley and the *Time* like helping me actually keep my career afloat as like they felt like I was their like son. That's how they like kind of treated like how they oh we kinda put this guy out there, we can't just leave him out to dry. Let's give him more opportunities and help him. You know, like they-- Paul still reaches out to me to this day. What I remember... Instagram taking me to Look3 festival, and I did an interview but when I start meeting all of these other photographers and they talk about how their grandfather gave them a camera, or their father gave them a camera, or their mom used to be a photographer, or they got a camera for their birthday at like 7 years old. A lot of us, we don't have those stories. So I was like what if I can be that story for someone else and I was like... I start thinking about like just legacy and the importance of the work and what I was able to do with just one camera and a 35mm lens.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

What if, you know-- So I start-- I was like Imma start a youth program, and mind you I still don't know everything about photography, but I know enough. I know the basics that I can teach and I made a GoFundMe right after I got the *Time* cover and I was able to raise like \$3,000. Even the creator of GoFundMe sent me \$1,000 saying, "I saw your story on..." something and it was like, "I can't wait to see what else you accomplish." And I just remember this guy named DeRay reached out to me, and he has like the blue vest and he was most known for like being in Ferguson. He's also from Baltimore and he reached out to me about, you know, what was going on in Baltimore and everything. We talked and then we had coffee and um... you know and... he reached back out and said, "Michael Skolnik and Russell Simmons is looking for you." And I'm like, "What they looking for me for?" And he was like, "I think they saw your GoFundMe." And at this time, I don't even know what a grant is or anything and they called and they talked to me. I told them my story; why I was doing the GoFundMe.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

I want to buy cameras, give them out to kids, teach them, host art shows with them. And they was like, "How much do you need?" So I like... I'm-- you know, like I put the phone down and I was like, "Ma, they asked me how much do I need. How much should I ask for?" and she was like "They're just going to round it off. They just gonna write it off as a tax fund... a tax refund so how much do you need?" And I was like "I really need \$10,000." So I was like "I

need \$10,000.” They was like “Devin come on. We gonna give you \$25,000 and we’re gonna run it through a nonprofit” ... because I didn’t have a nonprofit or anything, and that jump started the youth program and since then, I’ve been able to host like 5 different workshops.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

I’ve given out like almost 500 cameras; I’ve been able to go to Oakland with Steph Curry and teach on his behalf with Under Armour. I was able to donate a bunch of film cameras to the studio museum of Harlem for their youth program. I’ve been able to use my social media to take donations. People mail me cameras and then I might run a workshop in the community and some younger kids are like, “I wanna learn photography” ... and I’m like “Alright well take this camera, take some pictures and bring it back, and then I’ll help you.” And where I started, I went to... Back to Freddie Gray’s community art in Sandtown. That’s where I taught my first 10 kids.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

I’m still running the youth program. I’m working on some stuff with Under Armour, trying to start my own fellowship now with kids would get stipends and work with me so I’m working on that right now for the future. I’m working on starting my own non-profit you know... I want to start a whole... I want people to look back at me. I don’t want people to just look at the work. I want to look at how many other kids that I helped activate and like help them

find their own true calling using the camera, and that's what I want my legacy to stand for.

Current projects

02:15:18:03

DEVIN ALLEN:

One thing about Baltimore, we love sports and we have some amazing athletes coming out of Baltimore. And as I document street photography, I'm one of them people that I'm always looking to like push and do things that people say I can't do. And the biggest thing that people said about me after the *Time* cover that I was a "one trick pony." I was-- I only could shoot one thing. After the *Time* cover that's it for him, he's gonna be a one off, he's gonna disappear somewhere and never to be heard from. These are like other journalists and documentary photographers saying these things on my social media. Like I've got emails, I've had people telling me this to my face. I'll never forget Fuji said my work was negative and it didn't really represent the brown world; one of their reps told me that like at a festival, and I was like ahh. I was about to cry like my work is negative, you know, it's like at the time like I got a *Time* cover, is that negative? It made me think about my work differently. Is it negative?

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DEVIN ALLEN:

You know, and it took like some more seasoned photographers like De Roys and the Robert Houstons and these other photographers that I met they was like “No. Your work is like, it’s important.” You know, and then these photographers telling me these things whether it’s like Jamel Shabazz or you know...telling me these things you know like, “No, don’t listen to them. Just keep going.” So, what I did was it was like... once again, back to Gordon. Everything going shot, I wanna do. You know, he shot fashion and that’s on my list too, but right now I’ve been focusing on sports a lot. So to stay in Baltimore to run a youth program, Under Armour gave me a full time job as a photographer. So I actually essentially everybody expected me to move to New York and live this, you know, that artist lifestyle but it’s like I feel obligated cause my career is literally built on the broken back of Freddie Gray. If it wasn’t for Freddie Gray... I know my photography was good and it probably would have took me longer to get the work out there, but Freddie Gray dying, my career-- I’m literally standing on his back right now, you know. So I’m obligated to give back to my community so I chose to stay in Baltimore. Slow my career down a little bit? Maybe, but at the end of the day I’m accessible to my community.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

So from Under Armour I learned how to shoot sports. So they let me shoot Steph Curry for the first time. They bought me my passport. I’ve been able to document a lot of sports, so we have this amazing gym in Pennsylvania Ave,

Sandtown area, we have this amazing boxing coach by the name of Calvin. And what I learned as Baltimore, we have to take care of our own, you know, even if we're sitting doing this interview in this space, I wouldn't be where I'm at if it wasn't for the people that I've met that helped me. If it wasn't from Peter from the Gordon Parks Foundation, or if it was Swizz Beatz giving me my first Leica camera, or it's people like... you know, Jeffrey Kent who took me under his wing to teach me the art, or people like Amy Sherald who's always sending blessings and, you know, it's a community thing so I try to use my photography to elevate amazing people in my community that are doing amazing things to help give them the photography they need to put on their websites you know for free.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

I don't charge them at all, you know, and in return I get good content. But I've been documenting coach Calvin for a while now. He's saving lives in West Baltimore and if you look at *The Wire*, you have this boxer, this guy who comes from the streets and starts like this boxing gym, and starts training the kids. That's Calvin through and through, and he's saving lives in Baltimore. I have 2 friends that passed away that he actually worked with that I learned about him through. And I wanted to use my photography to highlight him, you know, and I'm tryna do my best with that. So what I've been doing is like taking the page out of Gordon Parks' book and how he's been shooting Muhammad Ali. I've been embedding myself at the gym with these kids, you

know, and kids love images of themselves. So what Calvin does is--he does this thing where he's teaching them boxing, but he's teaching them how to brand themselves, teaching them how to do social media, teaching them stuff so that when they go pro they already have a lot of these things.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

So, what I do is I just I come in and embed myself and I document everything. So, it's from the training, you know, I've gone to London with Calvin for one of his boxing matches. Anytime he has a fight, I'm in the back documenting so it's like building this relationship with Calvin in the gym and it's just also building a body of work that he can use to promote his nonprofit and his gym and his efforts to help the youth because we're both trying to do the same thing, as inspire the youth to change, take different routes that I took at a young age and that he took at a young age. So we're gonna go over to the gym and what I've been doing with Coach Calvin is trying to use my platform to get people to get him a bigger lens on life and that's what photography is able to do is connect the dots where you might not even see a connection there. So, I've been working on a project with Under Armour where I'm highlighting the youth, you know, with everything that's going on in my city, a lot of kids are dying at record numbers at young ages.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

You're talking about kids that are dying at 16, being murdered, you know, because they are in the streets. So, what I want to do is to change that narrative around the youth and give them something to inspire them. So, I've been documenting and just giving the imagery to the kids and you know collaborating with Under Armour to give it a bigger platform and stuff like that. So that's what I've been working on for the past year or so... but I've been documenting Coach Calvin since 2016. That long form journalist... I don't know what this body of work is gonna be. I see a book later on from it, but, you know, with essays from the community but we just still building it all right now and it's just a blessing. He's given me... he lets me do whatever I want cause-- and then plus it's that trust. He knows I'm not trying to take advantage of the kids or take advantage of him. You know, we have that respect for each other and he knows that whatever I do, whatever platform I have, I'm going to give it to him cause I think he's just amazing.

Shooting boxing

02:21:28:23

DEVIN ALLEN:

Shooting boxing, definitely at the gym, is a lot. You know, 'cause you got so-- you shooting like-- I'm shooting like maybe like 30 kids at one time. You know, try to tell the story of the entire gym. So I look for emotion. I look for hard work. I look for those-- my favorite are always the intimate moments where you see the connection between the coach and the peers. A

lot of things don't know, when you think of boxing you always think it's like brutal, but it's like those down moments where the coach is giving a pep talk or he hugs a kid or trying to show the moments to those in between. I think those are glue in telling the story. If you look at like the way Gordon, you know, documented Muhammad Ali which that book is like... eventually when I find that fighter that I want to document it in the same way, but the fact that my favorite shots are those intimate moments... with Ali like in the hotel room, or playing with kids or, you know, those are the moments that I really try to look for cause capturing someone getting punched in the face is pretty easy, but it's those intimate, those down moments that I really... I love just seeing people be human.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

I like seeing people be vulnerable, you know, those are the most inspiring moments to me. So I try to look for a little bit of everything, but I always try to look for those moments where you really see that human interaction, that human connection, you know, and once again, every time I look to do something in Baltimore, I try to create as much positivity as I can 'cause we need it.

Muhammad Ali

02:23:10:03

DEVIN ALLEN:

Yeah, like they were the first images that I saw from Gordon and it was... the way he framed them... and I'm like he's shooting film right now? How's this even possible? But it was... I think... so a lot of times when people think about what makes a good image...like it's all about what you are trying to portray at that time. A lot of people say just because an image is clear doesn't make it a good image. That's just me. You know, so it's like even the action moments like how you could tell he slowed the shutter down a little bit to get that blur, you know, like that's what I look for, you know, and those things I emulate in my own photography is about knowing when to speed up that shutter speed or get that locked in focus, you know, or the image needs to be a little bit more moody because, you know, he's sweating. It's an intimate and you get that portrait with the sweat dripping, you know, or if it's like him shooting through the mirror to get a different vantage point. The overall work in just the angles, you know, not even just the situations but how he framed everything up. You know you can tell he was just so strategic with it.

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DEVIN ALLEN:

And it's like does this guy like miss? You know, and it's just like the level of --the fact that Ali, you could tell he was just so comfortable. He was just in the zone in certain moments, but you can tell when he was paying attention to Gordon at the same time. You know, and I love that fact that nothing is not really staged. It's just so real. It's just so authentic and that's what I loved about Gordon, you know, and the fact that he was just shooting film so well.

You know, and it's like... I wish I was there to see like- like how he really shot.

02:24:51:02

DEVIN ALLEN:

You know, because it's like an art form to it. Like he was just- he was just one of a kind. You know, and I've always-- whenever I'm going to go shoot the gym, I always have to revisit the book because it's just like every time I look I see something different. But I think one of my favorite images is just the way that he's able to... something that I'm actually practicing right now is able to... you can tell his hands were so steady. When he can just focus on Ali's face you can see that emotion, but you can see the speed of Ali you know I just... Gordon's understanding of photography on when to do something and when not, is what really intrigues me, and it's something that when I was starting I just was always worrying about is the image clear? Is the ISO perfect? Is everything just perfect, but sometimes some of the most imperfect pictures is how you relay that emotion. That's what I think he was so good at, too. In every situation he knew what he needed to do to make that image.

02:25:43:22

DEVIN ALLEN:

He really captured Ali at every moment. You saw like the goofiness of him, when he was like playing with kids. You saw the seriousness, you know, you saw every aspect of Ali and that's really hard to do when you're like shooting a subject to get all those types of emotions out of like one person. It's really

hard. I thought-- People think it's easy. like Imma just follow this person around all day. Like it's not that easy to capture all those moments or try to capture the layer-- Definitely a person like Ali to capture every level or, you know, emotion out of him. And it's interesting, it's like how... Gordon was able to do that, you know, with- with- with Ali.

Leaving Baltimore

02:26:33:18

DEVIN ALLEN:

You know, I don't wanna become a stagnant. Once I feel like-- I'm actually like once like... I feel like my... my job is never not done here, but once I get to a certain place where I feel like ok I need to experience something else, I will leave. But what Gordon was able to do... I just think it's like a human component when you just care. You know, I think a lot of times-- like for me and some of my favorite artists you can tell my favorite artists are people who... you just know they had a good heart. You know, 'cause a lot, and definitely in photography, a lot of people when you think about a lot of photographers you can tell that they were trying to get an award or trying to do these things but it's like with Gordon everywhere he went and everybody that I know who have met Gordon just like he just leaves this like beautiful stain on you.

02:27:24:11

DEVIN ALLEN:

It's like you can-- even when you look at photographs 'cause I don't like being photographed. Gordon makes me want to get photographed, you know, to have those images. Even when you see how he amidst these lights and-- and, you know, it's like this one image, I think he was walking to the car and he's like looking up and you can just see like the power and the joy inside of this man, you know, and it's just like definitely in society, you know, I feel like a lot of us can lose that. That human nature element, that caring element that makes humans beautiful sometimes because of society. The fact that he was able to move so many different-- transcend so many spaces that I think that also comes with the fact that he was able to live long enough to grow and really understand human nature on a whole other level from being around so many different types of people and that's something that I'm learning right now. Like I said, I've been in Baltimore all my life, but now that I'm hanging around different types of artists, I'm able to travel a little bit more. I'm starting to understand the world different.

02:28:25:02

DEVIN ALLEN:

That's what I think that I lack right now as an artist that Gordon eventually understood, you know. It's being able to be behind the camera step from behind it and being able to connect to all walks of life and not to be... not to prejudge I guess, and draw his own conclusions.

Shaft

02:28:49:23

DEVIN ALLEN:

Original *Shaft* me and my mom watched it, and at the time I didn't even know and then I rewatched it again. And then I rewatched *Superfly*, which I believe his son did, yup. But like even looking at the work... the work and how he was able to like transcend all those spaces even working in music, it's just like... and then poetry and it's like... when do you have the time to master all that? You know? And that's what I'm trying to figure out right now. Like right now, his journey, you know, has inspired me and even as an artist I feel like photography has its limitations creatively where you want to do certain things you need other mediums to get your point across. Even for me I've moved into building installations and studying other painters like Jeffrey Kent and Chris Wilson, you know, artists in Baltimore where you know photography is always gonna be my first love, but to be the artist that I wanna be and to even scrape where Gordon Parks was, I have to move into other things and film is something that I always wanted to touch, and for Baltimore, eventually, I will and I look forward into moving into documentary work and really telling real stories, even some fiction about growing up here in Baltimore. That's actually my goal one day.

The Atmosphere of Crime

02:30:16:05

DEVIN ALLEN:

Yeah, there's two sides to everything. You know, some of my images you might look at it... let's say if I post a picture of like... might be like of someone hiding on out and some people might look at that and be like "Oh, that's negative." And then like no, it's reality, you know. And that's one thing Gordon was able to transcend spaces and also move and I think the work is actually very vital, you know, being able to cross over in those other spaces and tell both sides of the story, which those images are like some of my favorite also. You look at the image when-- either from shooting gang members then shooting-- being able to go into a police station or seeing police officers kicking in doors and from that perspective. I think it's important and is essential to growth as an artist and just a human being to able to see from both sides actually makes you a better person. You know, I think a lot of times we, as humans, can be really lazy and say well I only see it this way and that's just what it is or I see it this way, so we're gonna bump heads.

02:31:18:18

DEVIN ALLEN:

It's like, in all actuality, if you really sat down and really communicated, you know, imagine what you really can do, and I think that's why photography is so, so important because you can look at an image and see one thing and another person can digest it and see something else, but imagine if you can get into a space where you have two people sitting down. I've ran into a situation where-- in my book I have like a picture of like a guy with a mouth

full of gold and then I have a picture of a police officer, a Black police officer, crying. You know, and... I put the image in a show of the police officer crying, and now you got a guy that I know that is a police officer talking about the image, and then I have a homeboy that I know that's like from the streets... been locked up. They're talking about this same image, and I'm just sitting there and I'm just like listening to them going back and forth. Mind you he don't know that he's a cop and he don't know anything about him.

02:32:17:12

DEVIN ALLEN:

It's just two Black guys having a conversation about how this image makes you feel, and I was like "Hey. You know he's a cop, right? You know, he's a felon right?" Making a joke and they just like, but they were agreeing, you know. They both agreed that the cop looked conflicted. "Yeah, yeah of course because he's a Black police officer." You know, "he has to do this. This is his job. This this and that." But they were able to have a conversation because of an image. I think that's what Gordon shooting both sides, it's vital to a story. I wish more people were able to do that. You know, but even for me, I know a lot of... once again Gordon. I did a ride along with a police officer and documented it. Will people say like, "why are you riding around with a police officer?" Maybe, but I got a better understanding from documenting both sides. Documenting every day from my perspective of growing up in Baltimore and then looking at it from a police officer's lens a little bit,

documenting them doing house raids, you know, for *New York Times* a while back.

02:33:14:09

DEVIN ALLEN:

And I followed this police officer around. It was very interesting, but it actually helped me understand the demographic and the landscape a little bit more, but I– I think it’s important. That’s what made him out of this world. Most people probably would never go to document. Definitely not in those times and definitely not now, you know, but I think it’s– it’s vital to also realize sometimes as an artist, we are the medium between opposing sides, and we are the only ones that can actually create that narrative to even start a conversation. From photography to painting to creating, you know, things that move people. You know, art makes the world go round. When you think about historically what art has been able to do and– and play a major role in shaping narratives around community. If you looked at my community, an African American community, it’s amazing film that [unintelligible] gave from the Smithsonian called *Through a Lens Darkly*, I believe, by Erik Thompson, I believe. And it talks about the power of photography and how photography was vital in shaping this narrative about Black people to the rest of the world. That’s some powerful stuff to like really... knowing that a photograph can be tampered with or changed or a photoshoot can change how a person perceives, you know, or down to stripping slaves and photographing them and create that Black brute type thing.

02:34:42:07

DEVIN ALLEN:

So, I think when you look at African American stories told from a White lens, why can't African Americans tell a White story from a Black lens? You know, I think it's important.

Being part of a movement

02:35:00:21

DEVIN ALLEN:

I don't think it's by chance I was put in this position, you know, I just think that it's something like my ancestors are guiding me and everything, and that's what I think a lot of us are doing. I think like as long as it's like... something to fight for, there's always gonna be people like Gordon. There's always gonna be people like Dubois. There's always gonna be people that we need to like keep our culture and our people moving forward, and I think I have obligations to continue this journey and making sure that everything that I can possibly do to make things better or use my art form to do is- is- is mandatory.

02:35:17

DEVIN ALLEN:

You know, it's mandatory that I continue this path. You know, I think Gordon probably felt the same way once he realized what the camera was and what it meant to him that it's like ok, this is my path. I'm gonna walk this divine path

and continue it. And even in like the darkest moments for me, you know, still being able to have a certain level of success, but still have to deal with everyday life in Baltimore, you know. I have so many photographs of people that are no longer here that I've lost, but gotta keep going. Gotta keep evolving, gotta keep getting better and laying foundations so when the next generation gets that camera or that paint brush. I have-- not have the perfect formula, but you can be inspired by the steps that I took to tell our story. Similar to what Gordon is for me or Robert Houston or Jamel Shabazz or a lot of these artists that Gordon has touched. And they're now playing, you know, playing with a conduit and connection of Gordon. I have these artists that I can look to and actually have conversations with that tie me even closer to Gordon.

Artist community

02:36:48:17

DEVIN ALLEN:

A lot of the stuff that I'm actually learning is from either the Gordon Parks Foundation, or like Jeffrey Kent, or like Derrick Adams, who's another fellow. Or I've learned and found out so many people from Deb Willis and Hank Willis Thomas who's also another fellow. So like a lot of times when I'm around, I'm learning. I'm like a sponge and that's what I tell people, my journey as an artist I only been an artist since 2013. I'm really just getting started and I'm really just learning, and I'm just super proud that it is a

community that Gordon left behind that artist that are just finding their spark or who they are. That they actually put a village around you, you know, and it's like you can't fail with people like Ruby Fraizer who around or the Kehinde Wileys or the Amy Sherralds or Swizz Beatz or, you know, down in Baltimore we got the Jeffrey Kents and the Jerrell Gibbs and the D. Watkins and the Kondwanis. We are all artists that, you know, look to the past for a lot of inspiration that came before us.

02:37:50:02

DEVIN ALLEN:

You know like... And like I said I'm still learning. I just learned about like the Toni Morrison and I'm leaning about all these artists that came before me and it's just like they laid down the groundwork. So, it's up to us now and the next generation to pick it up and just like keep going, you know, and I'm just lucky enough to be around, you know, in this time. Right now, Baltimore is going through like a Renaissance right now, and I'm able to like talk to kids and teach them about Gordon. More kids know about Gordon because I force it down their throats all day, you know.

END TC: 02:38:22:06