



KATE VEIK

A boy walks through rain on his family's farm at the foot of Ciciavica Mountain in Kosovo. The family fled into the mountains as fighting drew near in 1999. When family members returned at the end of the war, they found their property destroyed. It took six months to rebuild.



VANESSA SKOCZ

Fidushe Gashi of Krusha, Kosovo, receives a kiss from her mother during the mourning period before the funeral of Fidushe's daughter Fjolla. The girl died of her injuries a week after being hit by a car while walking to school. Three other girls were still in the hospital.

Storytelling through photos brings poverty close-up

By KELLY BARTLING

UNIVERSITY COMMUNICATIONS

When Bruce Thorson leads a photo-documentary class to its newest assignment, he knows the students are embarking on a life-changing adventure.

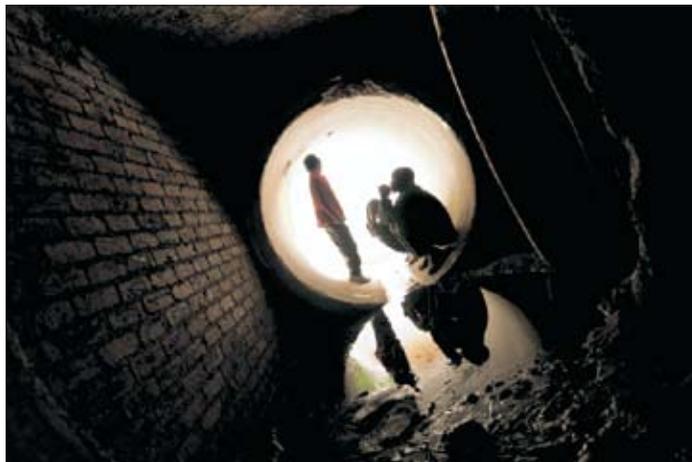
With a digital camera as their primary storytelling tool, plus a digital recorder and a laptop with wireless Internet, the student photojournalists are practicing their craft.

"They're experiencing a topic and connecting with a story close-up," said Thorson, a UNL photojournalism professor and an award-winning former photo chief of the St. Paul Pioneer Press.

"They're also going to a place where they're going to be with a large number of people who own just the clothes on their backs," he said.

In its fourth year and fourth project, the College of Journalism and Mass Communications' in-depth photojournalism class took students to places where humans struggle with poverty.

This spring, the class took a three-week trip to western Nebraska, where the students documented the changing lives of migrant farmworkers. Other trips have taken them around the globe, to Kosovo, South Africa and Kazakhstan. They will travel to Kyrgyzstan this winter.



ANNA MOSTEK

Orphaned boys who live in a Johannesburg sewer watch the street activity outside their underground residence.

Supported by a \$2 million endowment by photographers Howard Buffett, Joel Sartore and Thomas Mangelsen, the student photodocumentary program focusing on poverty is the only one of its kind in the country, Thorson said.

"This is in-depth documentary photography," he said. "In order to (tell the story) we have to have time."

After spending the entire semester studying their topics and preparing to travel, the students then live for up to three weeks alongside shepherds in the high-mountain meadows of Kazakhstan, with

families in war-torn Kosovo or in the sugar beet fields near Scottsbluff, Neb.

The students quickly learn how important it is to establish trust with their subjects. "As an outsider, you don't just walk in," Thorson said.

That's especially true when you need access to people's lives to tell their stories.

"The students are trying to go beyond the workplaces and into people's lives — having dinner, brushing their teeth — experiencing their culture," Thorson said. "This isn't a daily newspaper story. This is on location and documenting a

way of life."

Working out of a camping trailer during the trip to western Nebraska, Thorson and six students produced a blog: <http://unlphotojournalism-migrant.wordpress.com>. They also created slideshows and prepared a photo exhibition.

The stories' common thread is the changing role of the migrant farm worker in sugar beet country after the recent emergence of Roundup Ready beets. How are migrant laborers finding work? How are their families affected?

Thorson said Sartore, Buffett and Mangelsen believe in the power of photography as a storytelling device as much as they believe in the power of humankind to care for those who struggle with poverty.

Through the endowment, students' travel and equipment expenses are covered, which offers the students a chance to gain experience as journalists. They upload photos from the field and work as true "in-the-field" reporters.

They are discovering that no matter how simple or dire a family's life may seem, happiness still abounds.

"I have students telling me that 'these people have nothing. Yet they are so happy,'" Thorson said. "It brings them to tears."