

Spirit of a Spartan

The number one quality a street photographer must possess is courage. Without courage, how will you find the will to make photographs? A street photographer is not just a visual artist. I prefer the idea that you are a Spartan of the street.

“Spartans! What is your profession?”

“Aho! Aho! Aho!”

How were you as a child?

When I was a young boy, I would explore in the forest, play football, basketball, baseball, hockey, lacrosse, ride bikes, climb trees, and skateboard. I basically played every major sport except for soccer. Soccer always seemed super lame to me. My least favorite sport that I played as a kid was baseball—also very boring.

American football was really fun. I played for maybe two years, I think seventh and eighth grade, and was a tight end for both offense and defense. I actually scored a touchdown one time with a small pop pass. Because I was one of the fastest runners on the team, they would sometimes look for me to run the ball. I liked playing on the end of the line because it was a hybrid approach—both defending the quarterback, the runners, and being open to making plays on offense. Football practice was extremely intense, probably the most hardcore sport to play as a youth.

I’ll never forget when you huddle up in a circle with your full suit of pads on, and you put two people in the center. When the coach blows the whistle, both players charge towards each other, attempting to tackle one another to the ground. American football felt like warrior training. The craziest part of a football match is

when they kick off at the very beginning, and both teams are sprinting full force at one another. I remember my biggest advantage was speed, as I was very fast but also not afraid to take a hit.

I remember when the video game *UFC Championship* for Xbox 360 came out. This was around the time when I hit puberty—maybe 12 or 13 years old, sometime around when you go through hormonal changes, when your balls drop. My brother and I, along with two friends, would sit down and play the game. Something within us, and the two other boys, triggered insane testosterone rages. After one of us would lose a fight, we would start to kick the shit out of each other, just beating each other up for no reason. It was actually so funny—the way we would roughhouse, tackle each other, and really go at it like we wanted to kill each other.

I still have a vivid memory of choking one of my friends out, his head turning red, going full-on UFC mode. Afterward, we would go downstairs, laughing our asses off after cooling down, shaking our bodies around and hearing our balls flap against our thighs because they were now hanging low. It was one of those early boyhood memories I'll never forget—so amusing, just beating the shit out of each other and then doing some sort of tribal dance to showcase our growing testosterone.

I also remember in eighth grade, my basketball team won the CYO Catholic School Championship. I was a point guard, liked to dribble, pass, and set up plays for the team.

Skateboarding was actually the first and my favorite sport I ever played. I learned at FDR Skatepark in Philadelphia, which is an insane DIY park with large obstacles, all built of concrete. I was probably five years old when I first started. Skateboarding taught me to be fearless, courageous, and creative.

FDR Skatepark

The first time I arrived at FDR Skatepark, I remember seeing a man doing insane tricks, riding up the wall—the column that connects the ground to the highway, I-95, above the skatepark. He must've gotten 75% of the way up the column, but

when he reached the top, he fell backward, cracking his head on the concrete. There was a bloody mess at the scene. Despite this, my brother and I kept going back to the skatepark, learning to carve the bowls, pump our small legs up and down the large obstacles—wearing a helmet, of course, and I believe kneepads, elbow pads, etc. Like armor. Wearing these pads taught me how to fall and get back up properly.

We even attended Woodward Skatepark camp in Philadelphia at Franklin Mills Mall. One of my greatest memories was learning to ollie the staircase. You started at the top of the platform, ollied up a small pad where you did a manual (wheelie), dropped down the ledge, and then ollied a set of stairs. Honestly, from what I remember, the stair set was only about three steps, but they were very wide steps, making it almost around a five-stair in the grand scheme of things.

Personally, I wasn't one to try crazy stunts or learn the most technical tricks. My favorite way of skateboarding was freestyle—simply finding a flat patch of concrete and finding new ways to dance upon it with my two feet. I remember my favorite skateboarder as a child was Rodney Mullen, and I found out about him after watching one of his parts in a skate video on YouTube (*Almost Round Three*) at my neighbor's house. I'm pretty sure he is responsible for introducing the flat-ground ollie and developing most of the modern-day tricks that people use today. He's certainly one of the most innovative skateboarders of all time. Just go on YouTube and type in *Almost Round Three, Rodney Mullen*.

Beach Adventures

In the summer, when my family went to the beach, I always brought a skateboard with me. During the early morning, I would skimboard along the shallow end of the beach. You'd run with the wooden board in hand, throw it onto the ground, jump, and ride the shallow waves. I'd even put my finger into the sand, bending down low to make the board spin in circles, doing 360s, and trying to carve along the banks of the small waves.

In the afternoon, after a long day at the beach, my brother and I would grab our skateboards and surf along the sidewalks. I remember finding simple ways to skateboard in the flat-ground environment of this beach town, Longport, New Jersey. We would ride in the street and launch ourselves off the curbs at the entrance of driveways, where there would be a small bump in the curb, allowing you to get air and ollie over the grass patch separating the street from the sidewalk.

My favorite skateboard trick was the boneless, where I would plant my foot on the ground, grab the board with one hand, push off, launch into the air, and land back down on the skateboard. I would boneless onto benches, flip the board with my fingers, trying to be as creative as possible in an environment where you seemingly have nothing to work with. Skateboarding is so creative in that regard, where you basically have to find new ways to play with whatever terrain comes your way.

I remember when I learned to manual, I would bomb down this big hill in my neighborhood and see how far I could go with my two wheels off the ground—from one crack to the next, treating these cracks like gaps or obstacles to overcome. When new houses were being developed in the neighborhood, my neighbors, brother, and I would go to the construction site when they weren't working, find any scrap wood they no longer used, steal it, and construct skateparks in our neighborhood.

Tinkering and Hacking

I always liked to tinker and make things. Even when it came to my Nerf guns, I would open them up, remove the air restrictors, and open the bladders so the darts would shoot further. I liked to tinker, break things, and put them back together again.

Even with the iPod Touch when it came out, everybody in eighth grade paid me five dollars to jailbreak their iPods so they could access new games and customize their devices however they liked. It was so simple, but somehow no one knew how to do it. I always had a knack for hacking and tinkering.

How were you in high school?

I attended Central High School in Philadelphia. I remember my freshman year—it felt like a college campus compared to my Catholic middle school, as there were thousands of students now. I think there were around 600 to 1,000 students just in my class alone. One of the starkest contrasts between Catholic and public school was the behavior of the students. People didn't really give as many fucks in public school—more ratchet, more crazy, less controlled.

I think on the literal first day of lunch when I arrived, I sat down by myself, and some kid came up to me, took my lunch, and threw it in the trash. This kid was a bully who consistently tried to mess with me throughout the year. Actually, one time when I was giving a presentation in class, he punched me in the balls, making me cry in front of the entire class because it hurt so damn much. Imagine getting punched in the balls in front of the entire class—brutal.

I'll never forget, it was towards the end of the year. I think it was actually the last day of school, and I was waiting by the bus stop. He was trying to press me again, talking shit. I'll never forget beating the shit out of this kid, choking him out in front of the whole school as they cheered me on, making this rat scurry away.

Yes, I dealt with bullies in high school, but only when I was a freshman, which is probably normal for lots of people. The biggest difference is that in Philly, in the inner-city public school system, there's much more roughhousing `` `` `` markdown than in normal schools. I even remember being threatened with a knife and feeling genuinely scared to go to school because of it. At the end of the day, Central High School was pretty ghetto, despite the high reviews and ratings it gets, as it's often regarded as the number one school in Philadelphia.

To be honest, the bullying wasn't the typical kind of bullying you'd expect, like teasing or making fun verbally. It was really physical, and I believe because of my good-hearted nature, as a freshman, I was an easy target coming from a Catholic school. I never really posed a threat because I never wanted to fight back, since I had Christian morals and virtues instilled in me from a very young age.

One day I was getting books from my locker, turned around, and was instantly punched in the face by some big fat guy, giving me a black eye. In high school, I mostly found myself hanging out with some breakdance kids, watching the way they glided across the floors, hanging with more of the outsiders along the outskirts of the halls. I would skip class a lot, explore outside, and pretty much stick to myself.

I remember getting into indie music, alternative styles, wearing either long hair, spiked hair, beanies, graphic T-shirts from Zumiez, and even getting into street photography. I was great at graphic design after taking a web design course, learning basic HTML, and getting really good at typography. Actually, when I was in sixth grade, I'll never forget pirating software like Photoshop, learning graphic design on Photoshop CS3 when I was maybe 11 or 12 years old.

I think my childhood and high school experiences during my teenage years shaped me into a creative type, a lone wolf, making me the formidable, courageous person I am today. I believe that going through a period of bullying made me stronger, more fearless, and ultimately made me who I am today.

How were you in your early 20s?

I went to an art school, the Maryland Institute College of Art, in Baltimore. I would walk the streets of this dangerous neighborhood, Sandtown-Winchester, in West Baltimore, with my Ricoh GR II. I was making photos in a neighborhood where basically nobody else would go and photograph. It required lots of courage, to say the least.

There is one experience I remember: I was photographing a little girl with a flower in her hand, in front of a beautiful mural. As I was making the photograph, a car came drifting by, shooting live ammunition at a barbecue I was photographing. I remember ducking behind the grill with the locals, and as the car sped away, they told me, "Get out of here, white boy!" I immediately ran all the way back to my dorm, imported the photos, and just kept going back out there day after day. I was

never afraid of anything in life, from the young age of five years old throwing my body down concrete, to now walking around the most dangerous streets in the United States of America.

When I was 20 years old, I studied abroad at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. My gut told me to visit Israel. I have no idea why, but when I looked at a list of countries I could study in, Israel seemed like the most adventurous. I didn't want to just go for a trip to Rome or any of the other boring locations on the list—I wanted a real hardcore adventure. I spent most of my days traveling throughout the West Bank, visiting every major Palestinian city in the Holy Land.

I'll never forget my first time going beyond the wall in East Jerusalem, at Shufat Refugee Camp. I walked through the checkpoint, showed my American passport to the Israeli soldiers, went through the metal detector, the barbed fence, and then through the wall. I actually climbed on top of the wall and walked along it after photographing an epic scene by this no man's land.

During one of my journeys throughout the refugee camp, I stumbled across a really big and fat Palestinian man. He was fighting with one of his brothers, and I decided to join in for fun. I remember squaring up, boxing with this young Palestinian man—playfully, but also taking it seriously. I knew that if I showcased my courage, I would be respected more in this community as an outsider.

Even during my time in Jericho, I would arm wrestle every man in the village, beating every single one of them, one by one. This was a fast way to gain respect among the Palestinian brothers.

Where there is fear, there is also a sense of respect.

In Jericho, I made close relationships with many of the people there. They respected me and even allowed me onto the front lines during the clashes between Israel and Palestine.

Actually, during one of my journeys from Jerusalem to Jericho, there was fire rising from the border, and no one was permitted to enter Jericho. When I was at the border, I decided to hop out of the taxi and into a random Palestinian car, hitchhiking, asking him to bring me to the closest way to enter the city. He drove me to a hillside at the barbed-wire fence—the border that separates Israel and Palestine. I hopped the border from Israel to Palestine, slipping through the barbed-wire fence, running through the desert into the city of Jericho.

Once I scurried through the alleys and streets of Jericho, camera in hand, I marched towards the front lines of conflict. I made one of my strongest photographs of all time, of a Palestinian man with a tattered mask and fire blazing in the background, on the front lines while getting shot at with live ammunition, tear gas, and rubber bullets.

I think all of my life experience bubbled up to this one moment—letting go of all fear, reflecting my courage through the photograph I made.