

The Sunday profile: William Bragg

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Through William Bragg's eyes, Salem is not a sleepy, suburban place.

Bragg, 41, takes beautiful, eerie pictures of our town and the people in it.

He finds views in Salem that you probably have not — abandoned buildings and drummers' bedrooms and black-and-white shots of the Capitol that make it look like an imposing, decaying palace. He has a special penchant for shooting rock shows, the Derby Girls, and food that he enjoys eating.

Of course, photography is not the extent of Bragg's day. He also is the associate director of Willamette Academy, which shepherds lower-income kids through middle and high school on to college. He coordinates the Salem Project, a yearly collection of art, photography and writing, and is working to open a commercial photography studio by January or February. Of course, he spends lots of time with his wife, Jeani, and 3 1/2-year-old son, Liam, whom he says likely will be "(one) of the most photographed kids ever."

In college, Bragg studied cultural geography, which examines how people shape their lives differently from place to place, and although he doesn't work in the field these days, he still does plenty of observing, through the camera lens and outside.

In person, Bragg is a little bit reminiscent of an optimistic polar bear — he's kind of burly, with silver-flecked hair and a gravelly voice, and is impervious to cold, a holdover from the days when he used to break up ice on the Hudson River for the Coast Guard.



Thomas Patterson | Statesman Journal
Salem photographer William Bragg also is associate director of Willamette Academy.

William Bragg

Age: 41

Family: Wife, Jeani, son, Liam (age 3 1/2 years), three younger brothers

Hometown: Providence, R.I.

Moved to Salem: 1999

Occupation: Associate director of Willamette Academy, and commercial photographer who plans to open a studio in downtown Salem in January or February

Really misses: East Coast seafood, such as quahogs and littleneck clams and lobsters

Did he catch some of those things on a commercial fishing vessel as a teen? Yes

Clam chowder: Should have clear clam broth, with no cream

Family background: Italian and Irish, a slightly scandalous combination at the time

He grew up in south Providence, R.I., in a working-class Irish-Italian family. He shared a room with his three younger brothers until, he said, "the boys got physically too big to share one bedroom … we had four bunk beds in one room."

During summers, he would work on family friends' fishing boats off the Rhode Island coast — "Lobstering, quahoging, trawling and long lines — swordfish and tuna," he said. This, perhaps, contributed to a love of seafood so intense that when he begins thinking about East Coast seafood, he gets a dreamy look in his eyes and then feels a little bummed that such things are not available here.

"My biggest pet peeve is clam chowder. Rhode Island clam chowder is just clam broth — it's clear," he said. "Putting cream in your clam chowder is considered a high-falutin' way to eat your chowder."

When he was 17, he moved to New York City, to the Alphabet City area, which is in the Bowery area of Manhattan. When he arrived, he started shooting shows for a couple of alternative publications at places like CBGB and The Knitting Factory, but eventually found photography "was getting in the way of me just living, so I quit."

He was in the city for six months before joining the Coast Guard, and heading out onto the Hudson in an ocean-going tugboat. This gave him not only valuable life experience, but also the aforementioned hardiness to cold.

"Some parts I liked, some parts I didn't," he said of his six years in the Coast Guard.

Things he liked included helping people — over the course of two years, one ship he was on performed 22 rescues.

He did not care as much for dealing with or fishing out dead bodies, another part of the job.

Things went from cold to equally cold when he transferred to Duluth, Minn., though it was in Minnesota that he found his wife, Jeani.

He and a friend were in Twin Cities, and they decided to go out dancing at the last minute, and he spotted Jeani at the club.

"We danced, met, and then I moved to the fricking (Michigan) Upper Peninsula, eight hours away from her," he said.

But they drove the eight hours to see each other once or twice a month, and 15 months later, he asked her to marry him.

She got into grad school on the Upper Peninsula at Michigan Tech University where she studied intercultural communication — basically, training people from one country how to effectively communicate and do business in another.

"Things fell in place, so you think, 'OK, this is the right move,'" he said. "Things aren't working against you."

After they married in 1992, they decided to move across the country. Bragg didn't want to go

Potatoes or pasta? Pasta, every time

Favorite place to shoot photos: Inside small, intimate, dark venues

Education: Undergraduate work at Reed College, NYU, University of Michigan and Portland State; received BA from Western Oregon. Graduate work at University of British Columbia in Vancouver

Web site: www.williambragg.com

back to the East Coast; Jeani didn't want to stay in the Midwest. They considered the southeast and California and the Pacific Northwest, and then Bragg was accepted at Reed College. He was the first in his family to go to college.

"It was partly an ego thing for me, being from my family, my backgrounds, my neighborhood — to be able to get into a place like that, like Reed," he said.

Unfortunately, he had to work full-time when he got to Portland, and couldn't stay at Reed, and so transferred to Portland State.

In 1995, Jeani got an offer to go to Japan, and so headed off ahead of Bragg. Nine months later, he followed and took a job with the city of Kawagoe, where together they created and instituted an international education program.

While there they traveled the 35 minutes into Tokyo regularly, to eat and catch shows. They would be in Kawagoe until 1999, when they moved to Salem for the first time after Jeani got a job at Tokyo International University of America.

It was also in Asia that Bragg picked up his camera again. In 1998, Jeani had flown off to Oregon to lead a group of Japanese college students in a backpacking trip across the state, and so, left to his own devices, Bragg flew into Beijing on his 30th birthday for a backpacking trip through north China.

"It was pretty cool. That's how I got back into photography," he said. Sure enough, his photos of the trip are pretty epic — giant green valleys and yurts occupied by a Kazakh family he stayed with for a few days.

When he was a 17-year-old taking pictures, he said, "I started worrying about if I was getting a shot ... I wasn't listening to the music as much, I wasn't experiencing it. When I went to China, I just picked up a cheap film camera and started shooting, and it didn't get in the way ... I think, by my age, I knew how to live."

He had gotten past thinking it was cool to be a photographer and was more interested in just being one, he said.

"When I meet people, I actually have this extreme urge to photograph them," he said.

He was doing just that last week at a merchandise shoot for the Cherry City Derby Girls, a group he's worked with in the past.

He drove his equipment out to a former cinderblock factory off Portland Road, which serves as the derby girl headquarters.

The girls themselves arrived in Volkswagen bugs and minivans. They were accessorized with dark eyeliner and big, teased hair and, in some cases, little kids dressed in rock 'n' roll outfits, playing with Gene Simmons figurines.

Like Bragg, many of the women there have spouses and families, but that doesn't stop them from modeling booty shorts with fishnets underneath.

While Bragg set up his equipment, the team members milled around, discussing who would wear the booty shorts, and who wants a trucker hat anyway? It is so difficult to get these ringers tees over perfectly pouffed hair, one said, and then another discussed how she finds her armpits funky no matter what she does.

Bragg reminded them that it was about the merchandise, and discussed possible angles and shots and what would best show off the ringer tees.

He had set up in the cavernous factory space, and one by one the girls and their kids stepped in front of the lens.

Cecelia Austin, 6, was first.

"What kind of face do you want?" she asked Bragg, and everyone cracked up. Bragg said he would like her to make a mean face.

And then Tabor Satya, 6, and little sister Adeline, 2, stepped into the lights.

Bragg said he wanted to see Tabor's best muscle man arms, and Tabor happily complied. In the background, derby girls whizzed by on roller skates and kids happily ran around the old factory space.

Leslie Venti was one of the ladies on skates. She knew Bragg as a regular Venti's customer, but had only learned about his photography in the past year or so.

"I had no idea what an amazing artist he is," she said. "He's got such a civic mindset. He's committed to investing in Salem ... and man, he's all over the place."

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