

Candid Camera

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Cutting-edge photojournalist Jana Marcus pens a true crime mystery

Photographer, marketing ace, 2016 Gail Rich-award winner, Jana Marcus is currently in the thick of her latest creative persona—mystery writer. But it's no fictional mystery she's concocting—it's a real-life mystery involving some colorful members of her father's family. "My mission in all of my work," explains the award-winning photojournalist, "is to tell a story." And while the current enterprise is a literal tracking down of a long unsolved murder mystery involving not one, but two great-uncles on her late father's side, it is very much a continuation of Marcus' lifelong passion for creative narrative.

Marcus, who up until last year worked as photographer and marketing director at Cabrillo College, admits that having more time now means more creative output. "You're either working full-time, but not making art," she says, groaning through a million dollar smile, "or making art and being broke."

Busy as a freelance photographer—Santa Cruz Shakespeare, Tandy Beal and other performing arts events—Marcus contends that, "you still need several jobs to make ends meet."

Daughter of Wilma Marcus Chandler and the late poet/author Morten Marcus, Marcus arrived in Santa Cruz in 1968 as a small child. "We moved here because of the Houstons," Marcus says. Writers Jim and Jeanne Houston had known Marcus' dad in grad school at Stanford. "Our two families were intertwined in those days," she says.

Marcus trained passionately for a career as a classical pianist—until her father bought her a camera. "It changed my life," she confesses. "I realized I was such a social person—I didn't want to sit in a room and practice piano for six hours a day."

Marcus credits photography with opening up her "deep reservoirs" of expressive sensitivity. "The day I graduated I left for New York," she says with a grin. "Visual communication was fascinating," she says of her time in New York apprenticed to a fashion photographer. Once the glitz wore off, Marcus says she "had a light-bulb moment. I needed to do something that would contribute." Documentary and photojournalism called. She studied photography, first at New York's School of Visual Arts, and then finished up at UCSC, where her thesis work in Community Studies led her back to the gritty streets of the South Bronx in 1985. "I spent 10 months working with a social services group who put me in touch with the people who lived there," she says. Marcus often met with danger and active hostility. "Being young and naive really saved me. It was a learning experience that I have taken throughout my life," she says.

Marcus returned to Santa Cruz in the mid-'90s. "I cherished the quiet of Santa Cruz to digest and finish projects," she says.

The pace picked up for photographer Marcus, starting with an unexpected invitation to photograph vampires at Anne Rice's annual costume ball. That led to her first book, *Vampires*, in 1997, followed by *After Midnight*, which documents the nightclub culture, punk and heavy metal.

"Everybody's a photographer these days," she complains. "But not everyone is a storyteller." Determined to hone her skills, Marcus went to grad school at San Jose State, where she had time to create her own work, she says. It was there that she also discovered that her roommate was a transgender man. "I'm fascinated with things I don't understand," she says. She gained trust and began asking questions, determined to check out this phenomenon before it had caught the mainstream eye. At transgender support group meetings Marcus gradually found some individuals willing to be photographed. "It takes a huge amount of courage to come and let themselves be photographed," she says. First transgender men, and then women. The resulting months of work are compiled in Marcus' pioneer glossy photo essay *Transfigurations*, which is filled with candid glimpses of transgender individuals in the process of physical metamorphosis. The collection of original photos has toured for six years at universities and galleries all over the country. "The work really touched people in the community," she notes with pride.



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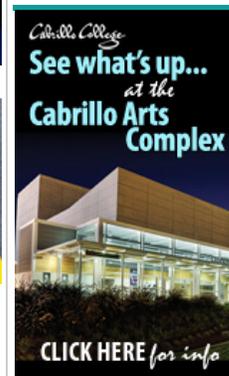
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Liberated from her full-time Cabrillo jobs, Marcus recently pivoted into the world of writing, developing a project she began decades earlier with her father—a true family story of 1930s New York, in which her two mobster great-uncles were murdered. “I have been so driven to solve these cases, which were long ago considered closed. The trail had grown cold,” she says.

Armed with a cold-case detective and a crime scene psychic, Marcus has traced the steps that led to those last weeks and days of the murdered brothers. “It’s a huge story, corruption, murder—it’s ginormous!” she says. As you read this, *Line of Blood* is being finished. “I just got an agent,” she reveals with conspiratorial excitement. “It feels like a new direction for me, finding long-lost relatives, reconstructing their story. I am a recorder of stories, be they visual or written.”

For more information, visit janamarcus.com.

TELLING STORIES With two photography collections under her belt, as well as the pioneering photo essay ‘Transfigurations’—which offers glimpses of transgender individuals in the process of physical metamorphosis—Jana Marcus is now pouring her energy into a new book. PHOTO: JANA MARCUS

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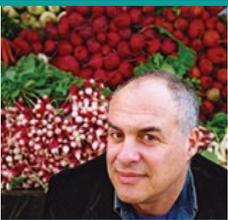
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