A young photographer's images go viral, and he becomes a sensation

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Baltimore, Md. — Devin Allen plans to get the word "smile" tattooed on his trigger finger.

It will be a nod to his West Baltimore neighborhood — where many friends have died in gun violence. It will also be a wink to his craft of photography, which he uses to capture this city in powerful black-and-white photos that have made him a surprise media sensation.

In late April, the then-26-year-old shot his Fuji X-T1 over and over again as demonstrators took to the streets to protest the death of Freddie Gray, who suffered a fatal injury in police custody.

Using the WiFi on his camera, he uploaded dozens of his raw photos to Instagram and Twitter, sharing them with his several thousand followers in real time. Soon enough, Rihanna and rapper King Los reposted a few of his snaps.

Then Time magazine put one on the cover.
"I just cried," Allen recalls of the moment when he saw his image framed in red on the front of the magazine. "And then I called my mama, and she cried."

**Showing His People In A Different Light**

The cover photo is a shot of a solitary blurred figure running from a wall of police in riot gear near Camden Yards. It is being blown up for Allen's first professional photography exhibit, "Awakenings, In a New Light," which will be on display at the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History and Culture.

Dressed in cuffed skinny jeans and Chuck Taylor sneakers and sporting a well-trimmed afro, Allen was helping out with the exhibit installation on a recent gray afternoon. Huge floor-to-ceiling prints are being pasted onto the walls.

"I hope this exhibit can show my people in a different light," he says, pointing out how his larger-than-life-size photos pull you into the scene. While outside media parachuted in and filmed the sensational parts of the riots, Allen was there when it all started. He remembers photographing mainly peaceful demonstrations until, he says, a clash ensued April 25 when some baseball fans outside Camden Yards started yelling racial slurs.

Outsiders made the rioting that followed Gray's funeral on April 27 seem like an overreaction to one man's death, but Allen maintains that tensions between the mainly black inner city and the police had been boiling for a long time. He's been racially profiled himself, he says.

The riots, he says, were started by young people just like him, sick of the injustice.

**Coming Together Again**

Allen also captured something that others didn't: He stuck around after the violence, taking photos of the community coming together again. "They (were) doing cookouts on some blocks since a lot of stores were closed," he says. "Kids playing basketball, dancing and singing, the day after Freddie Gray's funeral."

"He gives a holistic picture of what was happening," says Skipp Sanders, the museum's executive director. Not just the looting or the smashed police cars.

Museum exhibits manager Dave Ferraro calls Allen a "social documentarian." Allen uploads nearly every shot from his camera onto his iPhone and barely uses Photoshop anymore, let alone opens his laptop.
That doesn't mean that he's not a perfectionist. Shooting upward of 200 photos a day, he turns off the continuous shot feature on his camera — the fast click, click, click that captures multiple shots with a single press of the button. He likes to take time composing each shot rather than letting the camera do all the work. "Every frame has to be on point," he says.

**With A Camera In Hand, He's Found Himself**

Allen taught himself how to use the camera through YouTube tutorials and trial and error. "I didn't find myself until I was 23, when I got a camera in my hand," he says.

When his daughter, Amari, was born three years earlier, he was still trying out different roles. He tried his hand at poetry and worked at Transamerica insurance. Until a few weeks ago, he was working the overnight shift at a home for people with developmental disabilities. After missing a week's worth of sleep to work at night and photograph during the day, he decided to dedicate all his time to becoming an artist.

It's a role that has disconnected him from a lot of the people he grew up with, including his daughter's mother. He now spends his days taking photos and lives with his mom to save money. But, he says, "I found myself, and I'm happy."

**Using Photography To Leave A Legacy**

Now, he wants to leave behind a legacy for his daughter and other children growing up in Baltimore, where he says death is "never that surprising." He's set up a Go Fund Me campaign to raise $10,000 for camera equipment to teach neighborhood kids photography and give them an outlet other than drugs or violence. "I want to show them they have a voice," he says.

Before his images went viral (he now boasts nearly 79,000 followers on Instagram and more than 10,000 on Twitter), Allen thought about moving to New York to be around a larger artistic community. But he realizes that there's still work to be done in his home town and other towns like it.

There are lots of other Baltimores, where people outside the inner city can't comprehend that racial and class tensions are alive and well. But by capturing that in an image, he says, he can give offer observers a glimpse into why riots happen.

"My pictures are supposed to keep you aware," he says. "To make you think. To make you feel."
Quiz

1. According to the section "Showing His People In A Different Light," why is Allen presenting his photographs in a museum?
   (A) He wants to prove that the police in Baltimore caused the riots.
   (B) He wants to portray black people from Baltimore in complex ways.
   (C) He wants to present evidence regarding the interaction between Freddie Gray and Baltimore police.
   (D) He wants to reveal conflicts between black people, police and baseball fans in Baltimore.

2. Based on the section "With A Camera In Hand, He's Found Himself," which of the following is NOT mentioned as a result of Allen’s becoming a photographer?
   (A) He has more income.
   (B) He has lost a lot of sleep.
   (C) He has lost some friends.
   (D) He has a more positive outlook.

3. Read the sentence from the introduction [paragraphs 1-6].

   It will also be a wink to his craft of photography, which he uses to capture this city in powerful black-and-white photos that have made him a surprise media sensation.

Which of the following BEST defines the phrase "a wink to" as used in the sentence?
   (A) a warning for
   (B) a glance toward
   (C) an acknowledgment of
   (D) an announcement about
"He gives a holistic picture of what was happening," says Skipp Sanders, the museum’s executive director. Not just the looting or the smashed police cars.

Which of the following words BEST replaces the word "holistic" in the sentence?

(A) limited
(B) skewed
(C) complete
(D) wholesome