

# Louisa J. Curtis of Chatterbox Talks with Ian Bradshaw

Louisa J. Curtis



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Silhouette portraiture of the President of University of Portland, Oregon.

This month my conversation is with [Ian Bradshaw](#), America's Leading Education Photographer. Or at least, that's what it says on his Web site. Certainly, that is what Ian is now, but he and his illustrious career are comprised of much more than that spanning more than several decades. When we spoke about writing this article he also shared with me a copy of a paper that a student had written on him and in particular, his iconic 1974 image of "The Twickenham Streaker." I laughed with him and said - "You know you're getting old when someone (in this case a student) writes a paper about you!" But back to now and my first question to him about the changes he has seen in the industry in general, and more specifically within his particular sector of the photo industry, and he said, *"Obviously digital has had a huge impact although many went to digital far too early when the quality was very poor. Now, shooting at the high end, the advantages for me are huge. It has seen the rebirth of the photojournalist, and a 'fly on the wall' approach can now be made in the poorest of light. This is particularly advantageous in*

*education where students and potential students like to see real lifestyle on campus. The stilted, posed pictures, which some photographers are still doing, are a big no-no with the youth of today. The problem is that there are no good young photographers taking up the Cartier-Bresson style mantle because they are simply not taught how to do it. It is still the senior ex-Time/Life type photographers to whom this way of working is second nature."*

We talked some more about this, and agreed that digital has unfortunately made everyone think that they are a photographer, but it has taken him 50 years to truly learn his craft. It's just not that easy, you don't simply walk around campus and shoot – you have to know when to push and when to pull back. And, something else he said which I thought was interesting, and that is, *"Video does not get the decisive moment!"*

One of Ian's distinctive factors when he's working is that he doesn't pose people. He said that (believe it or not) the world's most difficult picture to take is two people talking to one another (such as a doctor patient scenario), and that he has seen more people mess that one up than anything else. And, he has re-shot other photographers' work when they have gotten it wrong more times than he'd like to count... Want to know the secret? The trick is to place the two people un-naturally close together, even though it may seem like they are on top of one another – in camera they appear further apart. This may sound simple, but to put two people (possibly strangers to one another) un-naturally close and in each other's space requires great communication by the photographer to make them feel comfortable – communication being the essence of a good photographer, and as a Gemini, Ian is a natural communicator.

Like many photographers, especially the photojournalists, Ian is a bit of a loner, and out of necessity, quite self-sufficient. He said, *"I have never relied on anyone else. If my assistant doesn't show up, I can do it by myself."* Having said that, he does usually work with an assistant and prefers to work with women because when traveling around the campuses, he finds it is easier to have a female assistant communicate what he wants with the students. She is closer to their age and less intrusive somehow... while he, on the other hand, deals with the faculty and the more senior members of staff. He still works out three to four times a week and is very fit. His gear packs into one roll-on bag that can fit in the overhead bins when he's flying, except for the tripod, which he either checks if he's also checking a large bag, or he has his assistant rent one at the other end. His roll-on bag contains two cameras, three lenses and three lights. Like many, he's been a Canon convert for many years now, but he did say that he wishes they would stop making those big white lenses! While they may look spiffy and

dazzling at a sporting event, black would be far more discreet and useful for his purposes when he doesn't want to be all flashy and invasive.

As an educator and lecturer himself, I asked Ian if there were any trends he thought young emerging photographers should be aware of, and he said, *"Too much reliance on Photoshop. They are not being taught to get it right in the camera - probably because their teachers are not working photographers. How many times do you hear 'We can correct that in Photoshop'? The work is slipshod because it is not being taught properly. Many colleges could do with a working professional coming in occasionally and teaching a 'thinking' class. There is such a ridiculous insistence on having degrees in order to teach. This simply does not apply to photography on the road. I would love to teach the occasional class of students who want to work with people, but according to many I would not be qualified because I don't have the right degrees. Well, they should know there is no substitute for experience and they should be pleased that working professionals might want to give up some time to helping emerging photographers in their fields."*

Ian summed it up when I asked what he likes best about what he does. *"I have always been a people photographer from the days I started on newspapers, although I shoot a wide range of work. I really like the communication challenges across a whole range of age groups from students to Presidents and everything in between."*

And conversely, what he does not like so much are, *"Account managers who think they are art directors. Some specialist education marketing consultants send their account managers on shoots and not their creative people. That's fine if they handle client relations and stay out of the way, but some think they are God's gift to art directing [normally the totally useless ones] and that does lead to head-on confrontation if I can't do my job properly because of their interference."*

Sadly, clients don't always recognize "value for money" with Ian and might consider him expensive for the arena in which he operates. However, due to his newspaper background, he still works very fast and produces a lot more images far quicker than most would or could! He shared one of his many entertaining stories about the

president of University of Portland, Oregon, who he needed to shoot while he was working on the campus. The university president was a bit uncooperative and said he did not have the time, to which Ian replied, he only needed 20 seconds and as he was standing between the professor and the door anyway, he might as well let him take the picture. Ian instructed him to stand sideways while he took a beautiful silhouette against a backdrop of his office window's Venetian blinds. 20 seconds – done! As usual, Ian, the consummate professional had the troublesome subject under his control within seconds and was done with him before he even knew what had happened or could protest further! Ian has a story like this behind every single photograph, and many of his portraits illustrate this perfectly. He is a natural storyteller, and instead of using only words, he tells us stories with his pictures. It's all about the story both in and behind the image.

And to finish up, I gave Ian some of my ChatterDozen quick-fire questions:

1) Most essential piece of photographic gear? – *“I think a tripod is most essential. So many pictures are ruined by camera shake and even at faster speeds it is amazing the difference sometimes.”*

2) Most essential piece of non-photographic gear? – *“My Blackberry and a GPS to find the nearest Guinness! And my absolute must-have in the car - Neos Overshoes with stabilizer soles. You just step into them wearing your sneakers or ordinary shoes and the studs never slip on ice. They are waterproof and warm and having dislocated a shoulder twice falling on black ice these are a must!”*

3) Do you have any pre-shoot rituals that you'd like to share? – *“On the road I always have a big English-style cooked breakfast. I hate continental breakfasts and if I ever miss a decent breakfast I am not in a good mood. The Americans are fixated on lunch but I really don't like stopping for lunch although I have to. I just eat fruit then.”*

4) What three words best describe your photography? – *“QUICK, CLEAN, SHARP.”*

5) Who is your favorite photographer? – *“RALPH MORSE who photographed all the Space shots for LIFE. I worked with him on a story for TIME once and when I was an up and coming photographer I used to meet him in New York and we'd sit and talk photography. He claimed*

*to be a specialist in nothing but just a journalist telling stories in pictures, a view I share. He was technically brilliant and I remember him working with scientists for six months to produce a photograph of a car exhaust with all the gases showing in a visible spectrum. A 'great ideas' person and tremendously enthusiastic - I hope some of it rubbed off on me."*

6) What would you do if you weren't a photographer? – *"Professional golf or cricket."*

7) If you could get on a plane tomorrow, where would you fly to and why? – *"Venice. I love the city off-season, no cars. It's a mess at times but I do miss the European culture and architecture."*

8) What is your favorite food? – *"Lobster or Chinese."*

9) Favorite animal? – *"My Golden Retriever Biggles."*

10) Who (dead or alive) do you admire? – *"Lady Margaret Thatcher. She was the only Prime Minister since Churchill I had not photographed, and then I finally got to photograph her at the University of Richmond in Virginia."*

11) If you could be born in another period of history, when would that be? – *"About 20 years earlier."*

12) If I handed you an Oscar for photography, whom would you be thanking in your acceptance speech? – *"A wonderful man called TOMMY BRAITHWAITE. When I first started in Fleet Street he was even then retired, but still working as a photographer on the Daily Mirror. He was the only one to give me any encouragement among the established photographers and taught me one thing that I have never forgotten and still use today. I had to go to photograph the Queen. I was very young in my early twenties. 'Don't worry lad,' he said in his North of England accent, 'Nothing to be nervous about. You and the Queen have a lot in common.' I asked him what I could possibly have in common with Her Majesty. 'You both sh\*t in the mornings!' I never forgot it, and it is a great leveler when you meet difficult people. You can just tell them, 'Do you know we have a lot in common?' "*

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