

Photographing hope

A Wilsonville native captures the rebirth of war-torn Timor

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The first time Daniel Groshong visited East Timor, he escaped with his life.

The second time changed him forever.

The veteran war photographer, who was raised in Wilsonville and learned some of his early photography skills at Portland Community College, has compiled "Timor-Leste: Land of Discovery" (Tayo Photo Group, \$40, 192 pages), a coffee-table photography book he hopes will bring tourists, and their dollars, to the young, struggling country.

The book is a labor of passion and grief. Groshong spent his own money to publish the book and donated the copyright to the East Timorese government to promote its nation. The 44-year-old photographer dealt with personal loss while working on the project, binding him even closer to the Timorese people who had survived decades of brutality and deprivation.

"It reminded me of Haiti," Groshong said recently while in Oregon to visit family. "Poor. A little ragged. Stressed by years of war. But one thing you notice right away is the Timorese are really friendly, and they always seem to have a lot of hope."

Revealing the essence of that hope -- through intimate images of daily life, stunning landscapes and tempting views of East Timor's recreational wealth -- was Groshong's goal.

Traveling in East Timor, Groshong felt the wonder that grabbed him as a boy with his first compact camera.

"When I was 7, we went to the San Diego Zoo, and my mother had given me a Kodak 126 with plastic film cartridges -- five cartridges," Groshong said. "I shot all five rolls of a flamingo before we even went in."

After studying with Terry Toedtemeier, curator for photography at the Portland Art Museum, and earning a bachelor's degree in fine arts from the San Francisco Art Institute, Groshong began a freelance career that took him to the 1992 Summer Olympic Games in Barcelona, Spain, and to cover the war in Somalia -- the first of seven major conflicts Groshong would cover.

"I never started out intending to be a news photographer," said Groshong, who has been under fire. "I can't even say I went with the flow. It was more like a tsunami hit me and carried me along."

The photographer first visited East Timor in 1999, in the bloody days before a referendum vote on independence.

Timor-Leste, as the small nation at the southern tip of Indonesia's island chain is known in Portuguese, had been ruled by others for centuries, first by Portugal and then by Indonesia, beginning in 1975.

As many as 250,000 Timorese were killed during Indonesia's occupation.

After the vote in favor of independence, Groshong witnessed a fever pitch of violence. The photographer hid under a bed in his empty hotel -- the staff had fled -- and dodged gunfire to escape, then returned to the country days later as it gradually calmed under the watch of United Nations peacekeepers.

Groshong returned to East Timor in 2001 to cover the first constitutional assembly election and found a changed country. East Timor had sent its first Olympians to the 2000 Games in Sydney, Australia, and the Democratic Republic of East Timor would be recognized as independent in 2002.

"I had a one-day assignment for Newsweek, and I stayed a month," Groshong said. "I traveled the country on a motorcycle. It was absolutely stunning. I thought, 'This is such a beautiful country.'"

A harrowing three months in Afghanistan and the impending birth of his first child with wife Menzi Dacuycuy convinced Groshong that he was done with war photography. By 2003, he had a book proposal prepared, and the young family - son Agos was an infant -- moved to the capital city of Dili. Groshong's father had just died, leaving a small inheritance that allowed the photographer to devote himself to the book.

But then Groshong's mother and stepfather also died, and Dacuycuy suffered a miscarriage.

Groshong struggled with grief, finding comfort among the Timorese. "There's no Timorese alive who hasn't gone through the same thing," he said.

The photographer traveled the country, staying in homes where he was welcomed with friendship and, often, a freshly killed chicken. With a grant from the U.S. Agency for International Development, he opened an institute of photography, hired assistants and began archiving the 700 roles of film and 15,000 digital images he had produced.

After two years in East Timor, Groshong and his family, which now included daughter Anna May, moved to Hong Kong, where Groshong is based and where he completed the book.

East Timor President Kay Rala Xanana Gusmao, Prime Minister Jose Ramos-Horta, U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan and former President Clinton provided short essays for the book. The most poignant piece is a poem by Gusmao, "Oh! Freedom!," written while he was imprisoned by Indonesian authorities. Ramos-Horta helped open doors for Groshong to explore the country.

As an independent publisher, Groshong has had little luck getting the book on shelves at major booksellers. The book is available through his Web site, www.tayophotogroup.com, but Groshong said he expected it would be used by East Timor officials as diplomatic gifts and to promote the country.

Annan received the first copy.

Groshong, who is developing photography books on diving in East Timor and tsunami-struck areas of Thailand, happened to be in East Timor when violence flared again last spring. This time, it was factions from the eastern districts of the country fighting those from western districts. Social fractures were long fostered by the Indonesians, Groshong said.

The young country is still healing.

"Getting the Indonesians out was easy," he said. "Dealing with this hatred, this inner conflict, will be really, really hard."

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