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IMAGE

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EDITOR'S CHOICE 2010

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## EVERY PICTURE MOVES A STORY

Students in FirstLight workshops focus on more than just f-stops and shutter speeds—they also delve into the fundamental craft of storytelling

BY AIMEE BALDRIDGE

► “Follow me! And make it snappy!” Jay Dickman shouts with a broad grin, calling out the window of his SUV to the woman at the wheel of the car next to

him. Moments later the Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer is leading a small convoy of vehicles up a winding mountain road to catch the evening light from an overlook in Dubois, Wyoming. It’s the first night of Dickman’s FirstLight workshop here, and the instructors and students had planned to meet up after dinner for a slideshow of each other’s work. When the rainy afternoon gave way to an especially gorgeous sunset, Dickman switched gears to give his students a hands-on lesson in one of the workshop’s guiding principles: When it comes to photography, all plans are subject to change.

But Dickman’s students have come to Dubois to tackle more difficult tasks than capturing an exceptional sunset. They’ve signed up to work hard, get an immersion course in a new media language, and tread journalistic ground that is usually the domain of seasoned pros. Instead of

sticking to workshop standards like camera and lighting techniques, FirstLight Dubois participants are learning how to tell stories through the audio slideshow, a form that has become a mainstay of journalistic outlets such as the *New York Times* Web site. In an era of ubiquitous imagery, Dickman says, if photographers want to engage their audiences, it’s imperative that they learn how to construct a narrative. “We’ve got the most sophisticated audience ever in history, in terms of visuals,” he explains. “If someone turns to a *National Geographic* page or a Web page, you’ve got about half a second of time to engage them. So you have to do it on multiple levels.”

**Above:** Workshop participant Gerald S. Meiling photographed a fisherman at Brooks Lake, near Dubois, Wyoming, during an exploratory shooting session at a FirstLight workshop in July.

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**Above:** FirstLight director Jay Dickman gives a workshop student a hands-on demonstration of a filtering technique. **Right:** John H. Ostdick's atmospheric shot of downtown Dubois.



Dickman developed the idea for FirstLight workshops in 2002 with Becky Dickman, his wife and collaborator in all things photographic, to give students an opportunity to go in-depth with documentary subjects and create works of lasting value. (After being named as an Olympus Visionary that same year, Dickman impressed the company with the workshop's concept, and Olympus has been an enthusiastic sponsor of the effort since the initial FirstLight workshop in Auvillar, France, in 2003.) The Dickmans seek out small, tight-knit communities where they can tap into local networks. They create a list of potential assignments in advance by finding compelling profile subjects who are willing to let photographers spend a substantial amount of time with them. "They've got to be almost like what I'd be looking for with a *Geographic* assignment," says Dickman. "The assignments are something I'd want to shoot."

As soon as the students arrive, they meet with instructors to select from Dickman's list of subjects—which may range from a bronze artist to a ranch cowboy to the denizens of a popular tavern—and get to work. At the end of each workshop, selections of the students' work are shown at a public event and published in a *FirstLight* magazine, to be sold in the community to benefit a local organization.

The July workshop was FirstLight's third session to incorporate multimedia work. But whether using multimedia or photography only, the program's objectives have always been the same: to develop the photographer's eye through the process of crafting a visual narrative and to hone skills through daily critiques. The participants spend several days shooting the same subject and receive daily feedback from the instructors. "I love it when somebody has the opportunity to go back out to the same assignment and continue shooting it," says Dickman, "because then they'll take that refreshed eye, that new energy, and apply them."

The effectiveness of this approach is borne out by the students' observations: "By that last Saturday," participant Chad Wilcox says, "almost every image I made was technically correct, the compositions were much better, and I



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## SKILLS | WORKSHOPS



## AUDIO SLIDESHOW ADVICE FROM FIRSTLIGHT

Students at the FirstLight Dubois workshop used Soundslides software to assemble their audio recordings and images into multimedia shows. To structure their stories, they used what Jay Dickman calls a "narrative template," which employs six sequential elements: establishing the setting, introducing characters, introducing an issue or problem, showing details to create intimacy, showing moments that bring energy to the piece, and then closing the story.

To make sound and images work in tandem, the instructors emphasize, they shouldn't be matched too closely or literally. As instructor Bert Fox explains, words and images succeed differently in telling a story, so the sound and image sequences should be able to stand on their own, while creating a combined effect greater than the sum of their parts.

More advice from FirstLight instructors:

- Start with interviews, then develop a shot list based on them.
- Photograph your subjects on more than one occasion.
- Try to shoot horizontal; that orientation works best in slideshows.
- Capture both wide and close-up shots in each setting.
- Record a little room tone—the background sounds of your setting—to fill audio gaps.
- Keep the tonal qualities of your images as consistent as possible.
- Let complex shots stay on screen longer.
- Don't use similar shots in different segments of the slideshow.
- Pick your protagonists, and don't include too many images of peripheral figures.
- If you start obsessing over a particular shot or narrative element, take a break and come back to your editing later.

was coming back with more keepers. The primary thing was understanding what I could have improved and then going back and getting it."

Dickman has assembled a group of FirstLight instructors whose collective knowledge and experience are hard to overstate. Lending their expertise to the Dubois session were Bert Fox, *Charlotte Observer* director of photography and former *National Geographic* magazine picture editor; Dave Harp, photographer and former American Society of Media

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Photographers president; and Jay Kinghorn, Adobe Photoshop certified expert trainer, who worked with students on capturing sound and using multimedia software. And of course there's Dickman himself, a longtime photojournalist and *National Geographic* photographer.

Throughout the week, students shuttle between their work in the field and editing sessions with instructors at the base camp at Dubois's Headwaters Arts & Conference Center, learning to conduct interviews, develop story angles, create shot lists, and make images and audio work in tandem. Most of the students work in pairs, documenting their subjects going about their days and shooting portraits and details of the subjects' environments. To

## MULTIMEDIA WORKSHOPS

These organizations offer workshops in multimedia storytelling: Participants construct narratives with a combination of still images, audio recordings, and sometimes video. Although most multimedia workshops assume or require proficiency in still photography, different workshops are geared toward different types of participants. Some are designed for students and emerging professional photographers, others are for working photographers looking to expand their skills, and still others accommodate amateur photographers and semi-pros. Discuss your shooting experience and expectations with the instructors before signing up. Many workshops have an application process.

**FirstLight Workshop** [firstlightworkshop.com](http://firstlightworkshop.com)  
Offers a small number of workshops each year; geared toward serious amateur photographers and students

**Maine Media Workshops** [mainemedia.edu](http://mainemedia.edu)  
Offers numerous workshops year-round for various levels from amateur to professional

**MediaStorm** [mediastorm.com](http://mediastorm.com)  
Presents several workshops year-round, many of which are geared toward professional photographers

**Summit Series of Photography Workshops** [photographyatthesummit.com](http://photographyatthesummit.com)  
Hosts the annual Aurora Multimedia Workshop for advanced photographers and professionals

**Knight Digital Media Center series** [knightdigitalmediacenter.org](http://knightdigitalmediacenter.org)  
Offers workshops throughout the year for working journalists

**Eddie Adams Workshop** [eddieadamsworkshop.com](http://eddieadamsworkshop.com)  
A prestigious annual workshop for students and emerging professionals; selects a few participants for multimedia training

**National Press Photographers Association** [nppa.org](http://nppa.org)  
Offers several workshops each year, mainly geared toward professionals and students; aspiring photographers are also welcome

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# SKILLS | WORKSHOPS



**Above:** FirstLight participant Michael Slider's photograph of a horse corral at the CM Ranch, included in one of the multimedia projects that students created in a week-long workshop.

conduct the audio interviews, each team develops questions together, then splits photographing and interviewing duties.

"Everybody! One and a half hours until deadline!" Bert Fox calls out. It's 1:30 p.m. on the last day, and the Headwaters feels more like a newsroom than a classroom, with students and instructors hunched in front of laptops making final edits to their multimedia shows. That evening, after the Headwaters opens its doors to the public, the audience watches the presentations with rapt attention, responding as if on cue to their creators' careful arrangements of sound and images with chuckles and thoughtful expressions.

Their reactions attest to FirstLight's success in teaching its students the key purpose of documentary photography—and the approach that sets it apart from other photographic genres. As participant Greg Lansing observed, rather than emphasizing the photographer's ideas, "it's about relating somebody else's story." AP

© MICHAEL SLIDER

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