



Darren Pang,  
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# PHOTO OPPORTUNITY

**Recent graduate Yana Paskova tells how she learned the ropes, honed her craft, hit the campaign trail—then got her pictures published in *The New York Times*. By Aimee Baldrige**

If Yana Paskova were a friend of yours, you might be a little jealous of her success. A 2006 graduate of the University of Wisconsin—Madison, Paskova has already had her photographs picked by *The New York Times*, *The Chicago Tribune*,

*Newsweek*, and Getty Images. You might wonder how a photographer who so recently tossed up her mortar board has already worked on assignment for the *New York Times*, covering one of the most momentous political races in U.S. history.

The answer becomes clear when Paskova talks about how she got her big breaks: It wasn't inside connections, sheer talent, or dumb luck. Instead, her success has grown out of a dedication to learning her craft, an ability to recognize a great opportunity

and run with it, and a tenacious love for the art of interpreting the world through images. Cultivating relationships with mentors and the publications she wanted to work for was also part of her recipe, along with a willingness to take risks and attempt new techniques.

Although Paskova earned a degree in journalism and never studied photography formally at school, her longtime interest in the medium led her to seek out ways to receive an education in image-making. “What got me into photography—apart from a natural interest that had always been there—was football, big time football,” she explains. While a student at Madison, she started going to football games and became intrigued by the photographers working on the sidelines. Seizing the opportunity to get acquainted with them, she met a photographer who gave her a business card and expressed an interest in helping aspiring photographers learn the ropes.

Paskova followed up, and was soon going to games with her first mentor, assisting him when he needed a hand setting up, and shooting alongside him. “The meat of the experience,” she explains, “was just observing him, and also taking my own pictures and then comparing what I saw with what he saw, and learning from what he had seen that I apparently hadn't.” She followed up that experience with a series of internships at Time Inc. and the *Wisconsin State Journal*, as well as work at her university paper.

Paskova had graduated and moved to New York City by the time the U.S. presidential primary races started heating up in 2007. When a friend brought up the idea of shooting the Iowa caucuses, Paskova's eye for an opportunity served her well again, and she hit the campaign trail. “I was simply shooting for myself because I wanted to teach myself the process of shooting the campaign trail. That was the second part of my schooling that really was irreplaceable—directly in the field, going through what every other photographer has to in order to make a good picture.” Paskova was captivated by her subject and worked avidly to improve her skill in portraying it, while also observing and learning from the more experienced photographers around her. There was “so much life and so much color and so many metaphors,” she says, describing the campaign events.

As her work developed, Paskova began sending editors selected shots, and her polite persistence paid off when the *New York Times* picked up the phone. “One day they just called me and asked me if I wanted to go on assignment for them,” she recalls. “It was definitely a mix of being in the right place at the right time and pursuing a newspaper for which I really wanted to work. I was very grateful for the opportunity,





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and it really turned out to be the best photographic experience of my life.” The experience lasted throughout the course of the campaign and election, culminating in a *Times* assignment to cover the January 2009 inauguration celebrations in Chicago.

When the primary campaigns turned into a presidential race, Paskova rose to the challenge: “There was definitely less elbow room. You had to work with it. It just added to the challenge of making a different picture.” Although she was surrounded by seasoned photojournalists, Paskova concentrated on developing her own vision and didn’t sweat the competition. She compares the experience to her student days: “In schools where a lot of bright minds gather, there’s always anxiety about being unique and comparison to others’ work. But it’s important to remember what separates you as a photographer from everyone else, and what your own vision is, and to work toward developing that. As long as that is your main goal, then other photographers will see and define you as the photographer you want to be.”



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“If we save these native cultures, we also save the environment that sustains them.”

In addition to developing her photographer’s eye for storytelling, shooting the campaign led her to take new approaches to her technique. She switched from using zoom lenses to shooting mainly with primes, a change that she says caused her to reexamine her environment and the ways she could move around in it. “I got a 24mm f/1.4,” she recalls. “Apart from being able to isolate my subjects a lot better, with time what I realized I really liked about that particular lens is that when I wanted to change the angle of perspective or distance, I had to move my body. I didn’t move an element of the lens. Therefore I had to think through pictures a lot more deeply, and discovered new angles and perspectives that I wouldn’t have, had I not moved my body instead of an element inside the lens. That just made me think more quickly on my feet.” She later replaced her 70-200mm zoom with an 85mm lens as well.

The transition from student and intern to working professional gave Paskova a broader perspective on photojournalism as a career:

“The world of photography is extremely competitive in more ways than you can realize, and learn from, until you actually experience of it,” she says. “I’ve discovered that photography is a lot more than just taking pictures. It’s also about marketing and reinvention; it’s about thinking about things as part of a business.” Practical matters notwithstanding, Paskova always returns to her devotion to image-making as the driving force behind her budding career: “The most important thing in photography is to remember that it is about your pictures.” Even if it is a business, she says, it’s “a business that allows you to do what you really want to do, which is see the world uniquely and accurately—and make a living out of it. What’s better than that?”



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