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'Latino Project' gives glimpses of local immigrant life

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STAFF WRITER



Scranton artist Rolfe Ross photographed this little migrant girl at Eckel's Farm, in Clarks Summit, as part of his new exhibit, "The Latino Project," which opens Sunday at Keystone College's Linder Gallery.

Over the last three years, Rolfe Ross has been busy putting a human face on one of the timeliest of issues.

This weekend, Keystone College's Linder Gallery will unveil the Scranton photographer's latest exhibit, "The Latino Project," a series of richly detailed photos documenting the daily lives of Lackawanna County's growing Hispanic population.

If you go

What: "The Latino Project: Photographs of Lackawanna County by Rolfe Ross"

Where: Linder Gallery in Miller Library, Keystone College, LaPlume

When: Sunday through April 29

Details: An opening reception will be held Sunday from 4 to 6 p.m. The college also will host the panel discussion, "The Latino Project: A Conversation on Photography and Culture," on Monday from 7 to 9 p.m. in Keystone's Theatre in Brooks.

The exhibit begins Sunday with a reception from 4 to 6 p.m., and runs through April 29. In conjunction with the exhibit, Keystone will present a panel discussion, "The Latino Project: A Conversation on Photography and Culture," featuring Mr. Ross and prominent members of the local Hispanic community, on Monday from 7 to 9 p.m. in the college's Theatre in Brooks.

"The Latino Project" comes along at a time when the region's immigrant culture is in the news on a daily basis, courtesy of the current federal court case regarding the city of Hazleton's precedent-setting illegal immigrant ordinance.

Mr. Ross first became interested in the subject while walking through South Scranton one day a few years ago and noticing a burgeoning Hispanic presence, from the markets to the storefront churches.

"I thought, 'What's this all about?'" Mr. Ross recalled. "I thought this would be something interesting."

After doing some extensive research on Latino immigrants, he went in search of access, a critical element for achieving his candid, in-your-face style. Eventually, he found it through Barbara Budda, head of the Northeast Migrant Education Program.

Through Ms. Budda, he was introduced to children taking part in the group's summer program, and families involved in the mission at Nativity of Our Lord Church. From there, he began photographing migrant tomato pickers at Eckel's Farm in Clarks Summit. And if a Latino group was having a function of some sort, more often than not Mr. Ross was there.

Mr. Ross ended up taking more than 1,000 photos, which were whittled down to less than 70 for the exhibit.

"This is a tiny glimpse," said Mr. Ross, who plans to shoot more in the future, including a naturalization ceremony. "Nobody can define the Latino community in 65 pictures."

"I think it's a nice look into the community," said Lori Ryan, a local photographer who helped Mr. Ross pick the photos for the

exhibit. “You get a sense of how they live and what’s important to them.”

Drake Gomez, an associate professor of art at Keystone and director of the Linder Gallery, said he was particularly impressed with Mr. Ross’ sense of composition and color, which give the photos a somewhat abstract quality.

Mr. Gomez also lauded Mr. Ross’ skill in “capturing the psychology of the people,” which is what Mr. Ross hopes to convey most through the exhibit. As he explained, Lackawanna County has always been a land of immigrants, whether it’s the Irish, Italians and Eastern Europeans of a century ago or the Hispanics of today. All came here for the same reason — to make a better life than the one they knew at home, he said.

“The Latinos are just the latest in a long line,” Mr. Gomez said. “It’s just a continuation of what has always gone on in this country.”

“These people come here and work their butts off,” Mr. Ross said. “They’re trying to make a living. Trying to get along.

“I want people to see this show and think about that.”

From there, Mr. Ross doesn’t especially care if people like his photos. The important thing is that they have some sort of reaction, good or bad.

“People are going to think what they’re going to think,” he said.

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