

The New York Times

A Banker Whose Photos Tell the Stories of Bronx Prostitutes

By **Corey Kilgannon** February 20, 2012 3:00 pm

As a foreign exchange trader for Citigroup, Chris Arnade, 46, makes a good income, and lives with his wife and three children in a spacious apartment he owns in Brooklyn Heights.

But during much of his spare time, he can be found driving the family minivan around Hunts Point in the Bronx, photographing prostitutes and documenting their lives.

Mr. Arnade says he hopes his photos and descriptions provide a platform for some of the most marginalized New Yorkers to tell their stories.

Mr. Arnade has also taken photos of homeless people and drug addicts found in the gritty corners of Hunts Point.

Under each photo and description, Mr. Arnade includes the words “I post people’s stories as they tell them to me. I am not a journalist. I don’t try to verify, just listen.”

On a recent night Mr. Arnade roamed Hunts Point looking for subjects. He walked up to a woman sleeping in a doorway. She raised her head and said her name was Sunshine. She said she grew up in Hunts Point and became addicted to heroin after falling off a roof as a teenager and becoming addicted to morphine while in the hospital.

“This is where I’ve been coming for the last 20 years to get my fix,” she said. She said she had begun dancing in strip clubs by her late teens, to satisfy her habit and support her two children. She said she was currently in a methadone program to kick her

addiction, and had come to the area to say hello to old friends.

Mr. Arnade first went to the Bronx neighborhood in 2010, as a volunteer at the Hunts Point Alliance for Children. He began talking to the local addicts and prostitutes he encountered and was fascinated by how blunt they were about their descent into addiction and prostitution. He began photographing them and returning with his iPad to show his subjects their portraits and the descriptions of them he had posted online, and to give each a large, professionally made color print.

Back at the office, Mr. Arnade drew some ribbing from his fellow workers for his decision to spend his weekends in a rough part of the Bronx. But that ribbing turned into interest and support after he showed them his photographs, he said.

“Most of the guys in the office spend their weekends with family, church and sports,” he said. “I’ve always liked artistic pursuits, to help me relax from the stress of the job.”

Mr. Arnade said he spent around \$500 a month on his hobby, mostly to pay for the large prints he gives to his subjects.

If necessary, he may offer a prostitute \$20 to pose, as he did on a recent night when he approached a 32-year-old woman named Nina on Barry Street. She called herself a “good girl gone bad,” having gone from Catholic school to working the streets at age 17. Nina refused to be photographed, but when Mr. Arnade offered her \$20, she immediately agreed.

“They get paid for their time, and I’m asking for their time,” he said later, adding that he generally offered cigarettes or a meal to a subject, or some other reasonable form of help.

On another night, Mr. Arnade drove up and spoke to a woman dressed in an oversize sweatshirt who was sitting on a fire hydrant on Spofford Avenue sipping from a small bottle of vodka. The woman, who said her name was Sooki, said she had five children, all of them in foster care.

“I’ve been selling my body since I was a teenager,” she said. “I take immense risks. I’ve been stabbed up before.”

As Sooki stood for a photograph, a man passed by and began yelling at her repeatedly, “What are you doing?” She hurried away.

Next, Mr. Arnade said he was heading off to meet “a gay transsexual prostitute who is a heroin addict.” This was Michael, 37, who dresses as a woman and goes by the name Shelley, as he tries to attract male clients and support a \$30-a-day heroin habit. Michael was standing on Tiffany Street near the Corpus Christi Monastery. Mr. Arnade took photographs of him near the monastery walls.

Michael said that he was sexually assaulted by a relative and that he left home at age 15. Soon he was in a drug rehabilitation program where “I met girls who taught me how to prostitute, and it was easy money and it became addicting.”

Mr. Arnade grew up in Florida, the youngest of seven children. His father, Charles Arnade, was a history professor and civil rights activist who braved criticism for his views as an outspoken antisegregationist. He moved his family around the world, to countries like Nigeria and Nepal. Chris Arnade earned a doctorate in theoretical physics, but in 1993 he moved to New York City and took a job with Salomon Brothers.

Surprisingly, being a Wall Street banker does not seem to impede Mr. Arnade. He is not shy about telling the prostitutes that he makes plenty of money in downtown Manhattan during the week, and that this project is his hobby.

The disparities in wealth and lifestyle on display could hardly be greater, and Mr. Arnade’s directness and slightly bossy manner are a frequent reminder of his status as a Wall Street dealmaker.

After photographing Michael, Mr. Arnade had no luck persuading three prostitutes standing on Spofford Avenue to be photographed. He headed off to see a woman named Takesha, who lives in a house just off the Bruckner Expressway. She was dressed in a red camisole and shiny red thigh-high boots. Mr. Arnade handed her a photo of herself.

Takesha, a heroin addict, said that at age 11, her mother had forced her into prostitution. At 13 she had her first child, after being raped, she said.

“It’s sad when it’s your mother, who you trust, and she was out there with me,” she said with a stammer. “But you know what kept me through all that? God. Whenever I got

into the car, God got into the car with me.”

© 2017 The New York Times Company