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The Way to Wanakena:
A Photodocumentary Study on the Concept of Community
in an Adirondack Hamlet

Kristin V. Rehder

Reflections on the Final Project
Master of Arts in Liberal Studies
Katherine Hauser, Advisor and Evaluator
Rik Scarce, Evaluator
October 3, 2012
On September 1, 2012, with fifteen minutes to spare, I entered the main hallway of the SUNY-ESF Ranger School in Wanakena, New York, where my photodocumentary exhibit, *The Way to Wanakena*, was to open officially at 2 p.m. People were already crowded into the space, which the Ranger School staff had deftly helped me turn into a gallery for the event. More than 150 viewers came that day (the hamlet has only 50 year-rounders); 120 stayed for my remarks and 88 filled out a questionnaire on the project. In the following week, another 50 to 60 people visited the show, the northern New York public radio station aired a special interview with me on the project, comments abounded on the project website, and on the Friday after the show when I entered the local restaurant at dinner time, the place erupted in cheering and applause.

By all seemingly obvious measures, *The Way to Wanakena* was a resounding success in light of the local community’s immediate response. Were the show and the results what I had intended? This reflective paper discusses some of the influences that led me to conceptualize *The Way to Wanakena*, the process I followed to produce the project, what I hoped might come from it, and some of the results I have gleaned to date.

Late in my MALS program, as I have written previously, I realized that the concept of community, and especially how it is represented in photography, had threaded my studies. My academic program in photographic history had begun, for example, with in-depth scholarship on Berenice Abbott, who employed her nascent photographic skills to create portraits of many members of the Paris scene in the early 1900s. (I became fascinated by Abbott, whose later writings on why it is so critical to allow the camera to serve its real purpose as an exacting piece of equipment in the modern age, rather than to use it to create either Pictorialist or sentimentalized images, had a profound effect on my
desire both to seek out and to create realistic portraits.) Less well known, but a contemporary of Abbott’s, was German-Polish photographer Germaine Krull—more politically savvy than Abbott, more engrained in the socially open European culture of the time, and more willing to explore, photographically, themes of homosexuality. This early exposure to Abbott and Krull prompted me to think about how two women, born in the same era and living in the same cultural centers, adopted entirely different approaches to the challenge of representing community.

When I then advanced to an independent study in women and photography, I encountered the work of Catherine Opie, a present-day photographer, known, in part, for her frank self-portraits and her representations of women in the gay community. Opie’s portraits of her lesbian friends, made up as, and dressed as, men in the series Being and Having, allowed me to think about community as pure construct—a negotiation, in Opie’s case, between the represented and the representer. Opie’s yellow backdrops (the same for each image) and black frames with engraved nameplates enabled her to present her subjects within a controlled format—as types—without reference to their environments. Opie crosses into the “represented,” including herself in the portrait sequence as “Bo” (a precursor to my ideas of self-inclusion and reflexivity in my project). In 1991, Opie’s Being and Having was a distinctive display of community. I first saw her work twenty years later in 2011; it influenced many aspects of The Way to Wanakena, though ultimately I chose my own path, emphasizing, for example, much of the natural Adirondack environment that characterizes the hamlet and my subjects’ attention to their surroundings.
At the same time that I was considering Opie, I was also learning to do visual analysis under the guidance of Katie Hauser. The ability to look at any photograph and determine what I felt it conveyed to me as a viewer was gift enough. But for the purposes of *The Way to Wanakena*, the seed was planted that community members would view the project autonomously, assigning their own values to the facial expressions, colors, compositions, and the settings of the portraits, and that this was a natural and important part of the process—presenting the work, then stepping aside to allow the community to experience it. Yes, I would have a concept as the artist, and I would manipulate the images and curate the presentation accordingly, but my concept of community might not be, probably would not be, someone else’s. This is a paramount point in understanding my approach to the project: it was ultimately how people within the community used the experience of the exhibit and my talk to define their own idea of community and their commitment to it—not how I, as artist and resident, determined community (even though I admittedly constructed it)—that gave this project its legs as an activist effort. One can then see, if that were my goal, why I was even more inclined to represent people straightforwardly with approachable gazes and realistic color.

In the spring of 2011, I went to Duke University for an immersion in photodocumentary studies with Alex Harris, the noted documentarian. When Alex saw my earliest portraits of Wanakenans, he implored me to do my entire thesis in photodocumentary portraiture rather than including photographs of community activities. My decision to center exclusively on portraits was sealed from that moment on, though it would evolve significantly.
In a course in African Art and the Environment in the summer of 2011, I encountered the work of George Osodi, a Nigerian photographer shooting social-activist photography that focuses on the destruction of the Niger Delta for oil. Osodi shoots dramatic portraits of the indigenous people—people of his homeland—who demonstrate a certain pride and defiance, despite their conditions. Contrasting many other photographers in the long-standing “concerned photography” movement, Osodi does not sentimentalize or aestheticize his subjects. His background as a photojournalist aids him in capturing bold, realistic images of people in their natural environments. I admired the connection he seems to establish with his subjects and the way he uses and controls light naturally. I was better able to imagine executing environmental portraits—images that would make it clear that my Wanakena subjects were tied to an extraordinary physical setting and resource. Osodi’s work also reinforced my growing commitment to capture the strength and dignity of Wanakenans and not to play on aspects of vulnerability or conflict.

My next studies, which were in visual ethnography, catapulted me. As I began to learn an inductive, methodological approach to shooting a subject and gathering and interpreting visual information, I advanced in ownership of my own photographic process. Doing visual ethnography gave me the gifts of using the camera to learn and not just to record, of developing data from a group of images and not just a single picture, of hypothesizing about what a series of images was telling me, of conducting photo-elicitation to engage my subjects, of going back to the subjects for valuable information, of the more formal aspects of reflexivity, and of thinking with greater self-commitment about social change as a possible result of my own culturally based photography. From
Rik Scarce and others I developed ideas about the importance of text to support my images, and I knew that I would want to (need to) do interviews, provide biographies, and probably include quotes to support how people perceived themselves as community members and what they thought the community’s strengths and vulnerabilities were. I was doubly sure that I would want to include myself in the project. I also determined that what I was after in *The Way to Wanakena* was not a visual ethnography but an artistic project informed by visual ethnography. I am an artist with a sociologist’s sensibilities. The artistic process itself and the work I do within the tradition of the cultural history of photography, especially with an eye toward social activism, is where I feel I am currently most authentic.

A final MALS course in religious revolutionaries, in which I wrote a detailed paper on Martin Luther King, Jr.’s, concept of the “beloved community” and how that idea was represented in civil rights movement photography and subsequent exhibits of the Freedom Riders, helped bring many pieces of the puzzle together for *The Way to Wanakena*. King’s notion of the “beloved community” provided excellent exposure for me to concepts of community from more formal theological and philosophical perspectives. The basis of King’s position lay in the worth of the individual, recognition of and contact with the other, a commitment to participation, acknowledgement that radical societal change was necessary, and a broadening effort to create a fellowship of humankind in the present day, not belatedly in the hereafter.

Looking at imagery from the civil rights movement, I observed that some of the photographers, who were often civil rights advocates themselves, tried to represent community by shooting groups of people in action. The images were of marches,
protests, rallies, and people working together to construct or improve community facilities or projects. Some of the captions for the pictures actually mentioned the “beloved community.” My sense, however, as a viewer, was one of personal distance; it was often hard to feel invested in the actual people pictured in these activities—to feel the possibility of a specific relationship or level of understanding being formed. I found the montages of individual faces of the Freedom Riders, created from mug shots of their arrests in Jackson, Mississippi, to be a more palpable expression of how community and community action can be created through commitment to and respect for difference in specific people with whom one has a possible common bond.

Thus it evolved that I would render the Wanakena community in portraits not because my portraits were more credible visually than my collective shots (which they are) but because I understand better now that seeing someone face-to-face in a photographic image—engaging the gaze—challenges the viewer to attempt to know that person more intimately, perhaps even more courageously. Then, reading about the “other” allows greater perspective and can (not necessarily does) invite connection, and possibly appreciation and tolerance. Imagining oneself on the wall—the exchange of position in a cross-section of community portraits—can encourage the idea that members of a community are on the same level, have equal voice, and thus have important individual roles to play in participating in and advancing the good of the community. Even from my scant knowledge of George Herbert Mead’s pivotal work, I believe my portraits are a catalyst for symbolic interactionism—they encourage interpretation of the “other” rather than mere reaction.
Before I describe my process and the outcomes, I want to turn briefly to a few of the ideas that sprung from my readings and experiences over the spring and summer of 2012 and which further influenced the way I gathered information and exhibited the work. Note that it was my plan to mount the exhibit and then read even further on ideas of personalism, individualism, and communitarianism before writing a research paper that is no longer required. Therefore, some of these ideas remain in very early formation.

My readings and experiences centered primarily on five themes: 1) the historic and cultural background of Wanakena and the hamlet’s long-term sustainability; 2) photographic traditions in the Adirondacks; 3) current issues of government, economic development, and environmental health in the Adirondack Park; 4) photodocumentary projects of note on the concept of community (such as *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, *River of Traps*, and *The Oxford Project*); and 5) theological and philosophical writings on personalism, individualism, and communitarianism.

As I had never studied Wanakena in depth, I was struck as I read local history by themes of the interrelationship with the wilderness, pride in early technology and systems, determination to survive as a community, the symbiotic relationship with the Ranger School, eccentricity, diversity, tolerance, friendliness, family life, stability and instability related to the mills and mines, local community delineation (Star Lake, Wanakena, Cranberry Lake), and the long-standing tension between government regulation and individual freedom, especially as manifested in Adirondack Park dynamics. Many of the current residents trace their roots to Wanakena’s earliest inhabitants at the beginning of the 20th century, so there is a direct, personal connection to these themes, which reverberates through the interviews.
During the project, I had assumed that a dominant issue that was emerging, i.e., needing to attract more families with young children to the community, was related to lack of job opportunities in such a small hamlet and remote region. As I worked to test that hypothesis, I discovered that the issue of bringing young families to Wanakena is probably equally related to the quality of education in the Clifton-Fine school system and to the remoteness, cost, and inconvenience of alternative schooling. I pursued a lengthy sidebar conversation on educational challenges with a Wanakena mother of two (she is a faculty member at the Ranger School) that bolstered my understanding of the interrelationship between educational quality and attracting a new generation of Wanakenans, and I was later able to frame that issue more perceptively in my remarks.

While reading about the environmental activism of famed Adirondack photographer Seneca Ray Stoddard, I discovered that his work in the region had led him to believe that the Adirondack people seemed disinclined to advocate for their own community needs, often bowing to the outside influence of Albany legislators and others. Subsequently, agency in Wanakena became an important sub-theme for me—who holds power, how is it manifested, can photography reveal agency in a series of seemingly egalitarian portraits, would the community be empowered individually and/or collectively by *The Way to Wanakena* to become more active on its own behalf? These questions resonated with earlier work I had done on Max Weber and concepts of authority during my visual ethnography project as I examined the abandoned Jones & Laughlin iron ore-mining site near Wanakena.

On May 22, 2012, I talked my way into a day-long event in Long Lake in which hundreds of people gathered to hear the results of a project called “Mapping the Future of
the Adirondack Park,” presented by Jim Herman and Dave Mason, two volunteer consultants from Keene, New York. For more than a year, Herman and Mason worked pro bono to develop and test six divergent outcomes for the Adirondack Park by 2037. Wilderness, recreational tourism, low-carbon footprint lifestyle, a new Park-wide Adirondack County with greater legislative influence, stronger local governments, and significant re-classification as State Forest were among their scenarios. As I became attuned to this project and continued my reading on the Park, my awareness of Adirondack Park issues and how they affect each community, including Wanakena, heightened. I developed a more acute understanding of existing economic threats to Adirondack communities and the importance of cooperating to sustain local businesses and reach environmental solutions where Park regulations are in effect. I was better able to listen for common themes on both sides of the Park debate from Park advocates and opponents. If I had not attached the project to a social activist cause, understanding Adirondack Park issues would have been less pivotal. However, it was not possible to state that I was interested in community outcomes without engaging to some degree in the environmental, political, economic, and other issues that stem from Wanakena’s location within the Adirondack Park’s jurisdiction. Knowing more about these issues definitely influenced my decision to include in the project Sherm Craig, a Wanakena year-rounder, and the first St. Lawrence County Adirondack Park Agency commissioner, and seasonal resident Neil Woodworth, executive director of the Adirondack Mountain Club. Also, as I was editing the interviews, I was careful to include comments of those who do not agree with Park regulations.
My introductory readings in personalism (Mounier), individualism and American character (Bellah et al), and communitarianism (Etzioni) yielded a cluster of pivotal ideas that shaped the evolving concept of my project and the specific questions and interactions I had with my participants. Examples, from among many, include the idea in personalism that harmony cannot be established at the expense of the individual person, that unity does not occur between those who are identical because no person can be duplicated, and that it is critical in community to be open in spirit to all others (Mounier, 25-32). These precepts magnified my attempts to respect and characterize the individuality of my subjects and to encourage the same from my viewers. I purposefully challenged viewers to confront unfamiliar visual and written clues to fellow citizens they might have felt they knew well (Bill’s participation in the gay games, Tim’s skating tattoo, Gail’s plea for greater tolerance, Polly’s frankness about city conveniences).

Another concept that engaged me was the traditional role of the “town father”—someone who moves outside personal life toward public life to further the community’s economic stability and provide crucial leadership (Bellah, 170). Wanaka’s long history of survival was attached early on to such a leader and until recently there has been a figure who donned the cape, but the hamlet is in transition. Who will play that role going forward? Is Wanaka more vulnerable than at any point in its history without such leadership? And what do we make of a young man who is openly gay who says, “I am the future of this place.” A final example comes from the communitarian notion of reciprocity: “each member of the community owes something to all the rest, and the community owes something to each of its members” (Etzioni, xxxiv). Whether or not the citizens of Wanaka agree with the radical idea that they owe something to the
community, to me the more interesting question is what do they owe. From this idea grew my belief that the potential of a deeper community commitment, sparked in part by *The Way to Wanakena*, hinges on the issue of reciprocity, especially in a place where seasonal residents (whose primary investments may lay elsewhere) are such a dominant part of the demographic.

Together, the multiple historical, philosophical, and cultural influences I encountered combined with numerous practical issues to help determine the parameters of my approach to executing the project. I would shoot twenty-four portraits in color of subjects looking straight toward the camera, thus enabling the viewer to engage the gaze. I would tell the participants about the project’s purposes and would ask me to help make and choose a portrait that represented them, thus encouraging their active role in representing themselves to fellow community members. I would interview each subject and develop textual material as a supplement to the portrait, writing brief biographic introductions but using quotes directly from the interviews (also approved by the participants) to achieve a deeper level of knowledge and understanding of the person being represented, both for me and for the viewers. My work with each participant encouraged us not to be just the lead subjects of a community project but also its frontline beneficiaries and advocates. On April 30 one participant who has struggled to find her place in the Wanakena fabric, wrote to me: “Hey, I had a funny thought: by being part of your community study, you made me part of the community.”

*The Way to Wanakena* demanded a strong conceptual approach to creating the images and text (which found its roots in my studies and which I have traced above), photographic deftness coupled with careful interviewing and writing skills, and a
disciplined process for presenting the work and ensuring audience participation and response. The logistics hinged on securing a venue for the exhibit in Wanakena, which I felt was critical to a respectful and responsible community-oriented project—that is, show it to Wanakena’s citizens first. Solving that challenge also determined an exact end date: the Ranger School, September 1, 2012. To meet that set-in-stone deadline, I completed all images, interviews, photo-elicitations, and text approvals; invitations and marketing; framing, dry mounting, and signage; and questionnaire development on an intense schedule from April 1 to August 30. For the Wanakena show I offered remarks that explained the project; spoke to photographic traditions in community representation, social activist photography, and portraiture; summarized what I learned from the participants (which required a careful review and tabulation of each interview); challenged community members to imagine positive outcomes; and requested participants to fill out a brief questionnaire, which I later summarized in a report and posted on a website that I produced: www.thewaytowanakena.com. Careful marketing, excellent relationships and accountability with project participants and the wider community, attention from the local media, a well-known venue, and exhibit dates that crossed over both the Labor Day weekend and the Ranger School’s Forest Festival ultimately helped draw over 500 viewers to the first exhibit, September 1-30, and the questionnaires and website responses provided critical feedback on the efficacy of the project. (Rik Scarce and I debated the need to use questionnaires since the project was inductive, but in the end the responses provided substantial information and insight, especially since almost seventy-five percent of those who attended the remarks filled out a questionnaire.)
Because I felt it was also important to show the project at or near Skidmore where I was earning my degree (with the advantage, then, of presenting it to a community outside Wanakena), I also worked hard to land a second exhibit at the Tang Teaching Museum at Skidmore in October. For the second show, I met a different set of logistical and material requirements, including selecting representative images from the overall show to meet limited space requirements at the Tang, developing a different set of marketing materials, and writing remarks on the community concept from a less Wanakena-centric perspective. At the writing of this paper, the celebration of the Tang exhibit is just two weeks away. Since the Tang exhibit does not include all twenty-four original images, I also self-published a limited edition book, *The Way to Wanakena*, that will be available to Tang visitors who want to see the project’s scope.

In very practical terms, the end product determined part of the approach to taking the photographs and conducting the interviews. For example, maximum single-sheet output on my Epson 2880 printer is 13 x 19 inches. All printed images conformed to that standard size (frames were simple black metal with museum-quality materials, 17 x 23 inches in dimension) and the wall labels were a standard 5.5 x 11 inches with text no longer than 350 words. Regularizing these aspects of the exhibit created not just a professional standard of presentation but a visual egalitarianism in how the subjects were exhibited and described, removing any appearance of preference toward one subject or another.

Admittedly, I chose subjects to create a representative mix of Wanakenans by my own standards. I knew that who was in and who was not would create controversy; however, I plowed ahead with artistic license, pursuing people who interested me, were
available, and demonstrated the diversity of Wanakena in as many categories as possible. I actually began shooting two summers ago to create a small body of work that I could review with my academic and program advisors. Once I received the go-ahead from the MALS committee and encouragement from the Tang for the images I was creating, I widened the circle of participants. Wanakena is small and friendly; people wanted to help me succeed in my graduate thesis. No one I asked said no. It was easy to make arrangements to meet people for portraits and interviews. I worked with an 18-200 mm zoom lens on a Nikon D90 camera. I shot in available light, often using a tripod, and I set up quickly. I generally photographed a subject for no more than an hour. My preferred sequence was first to shoot the portrait and then return as soon as possible (usually within twenty-four hours) with one or two possible choices (I stated which was my favorite) in order to discuss the portrait and the subject’s reaction. At those meetings, I gave the images to the participants as a thank-you for helping with the project, and by arrangement, we often proceeded with the interview. I asked each interviewee the same first question in order to establish a baseline for the project and because I knew the question would always elicit a distinctive response that could inform the project and enliven the text elements of the exhibit: What brought you to Wanakena?

Interviews usually lasted from forty-five minutes to an hour but they required four to six hours of write-up. I then returned for another visit to approve the interview with the participant, and sometimes, depending on the changes, I would visit a final time to deliver the approved interview. I also asked each participant to sign a release form that I developed with Rik Scarce and with the Skidmore Institutional Review Board’s approval. After fifteen to twenty hours devoted to a single subject or a pair for each portrait (24
portraits, 34 total subjects), I had made many new friends. My own community widened as a by-product of the project, and, notably, my role in the community shifted from observer to interpreter.

Beyond my delight in the sheer numbers of people who came to see the show in Wanakena (many of them returning more than once), I have been surprised by the public’s and my own response to *The Way to Wanakena* in two main areas. First, I underestimated the audience’s interest in and ability to grasp the conceptual premise of the exhibit. I feared people would be lured to the images of their neighbors and acquaintances, would be intrigued by their remarks, and would miss an important point: that people were interchangeable, that a community can be the active sum and engagement of its many members not the product of its “town fathers” (or mothers). I felt I might have photographed virtually any thirty-four people in Wanakena to prompt a sense of the community’s potential. Some people in the exhibit may have had slightly more cachet or influence, positive and negative, than others because their roles in Adirondack Park affairs or the church or hamlet decisions may have earned certain attention prior to the show. But responses to the show and anecdotal comments indicated that many viewers grasped the import of symbolic representation, were affected by the accumulation of singular visages and experiences into a tableau of community, and were drawn to the overall concept of community activism more than to a superficial interest in any particular person’s photograph or story.

Second, I was elated that the questionnaires also helped to provide evidence that the stated social-activist goal of the project actually worked. As I wrote in my questionnaire summary, which is posted on the website, during the opening remarks and
before the questionnaires were completed, I clearly delineated the concerns that the thirty-four project participants cited most often in their interviews. Those were: 1) attracting more year-rounders and families with kids; 2) the difficulty of running a business or doing business in Wanakena; 3) people bringing city ways to the country or wanting city conveniences; and 4) not wanting too many people to discover Wanakena or for Wanakena to expand too much. Following the exhibit’s opening and my remarks, I used the questionnaire to ask: What are the specific issues you feel are important to work on as a community? There was no mention of city ways versus country ways or of not wanting Wanakena to be discovered. Instead, tied at the top of the responses along with economic sustainability was respecting each other and welcoming diversity. This information, which I find tremendously gratifying, suggests that the exhibit material and remarks had a demonstrable effect on viewers.

An issue raised by more than one respondent to the project continues to challenge me. The gist is: how can I spur the potential of greater community activism in Wanakena and not follow through? What’s next? Perhaps I could distance myself at this juncture, justifying such a decision with the notion that if this really is a test of community, the community will now step up. I was, after all, completing an academic responsibility through a project that was both artistic and analytical. I created a credible process in which I chose, captured, and represented my subjects based on a concept I developed; participants complied willingly and joined me in the representation; individual viewers observed, attributed, and commented; the community can now interpret and react. However, I am a member of the Wanakena community, and I find that the project has provoked questions of my own communitarian values, my own commitment to
reciprocity. I am more inclined, knowing what I have seen and learned, to cooperate with others actively in addressing issues of common concern. *The Way to Wanakena* hooked me. It works. I have ideas for what comes next.
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THE WAY TO WANAKENA

In the tradition of social-activist photography, *The Way to Wanakena* explores the concept of community, inviting viewers to imagine ways to deepen a collective capacity to work together on critical issues. An upstate New York hamlet within the Adirondack Park, Wanakena is home to approximately fifty full-time inhabitants. Established in 1902 as a logging town by Herbert and Horace Rich, founders of the Rich Brothers Lumber Company, Wanakena covers roughly 530 acres along both sides of the Oswegatchie River, which flows into Cranberry Lake.

*The Way to Wanakena* is the photodocumentary thesis project of Kristin V. Rehder, a graduate student in Skidmore College’s Master of Arts in Liberal Studies program. She and her partner, Sue Washburn, are long-time seasonal residents of Wanakena. For the project, a selection of which is on view here, Rehder photographed and interviewed thirty-four fellow Wanakenans. *The Way to Wanakena* creates a layered perspective on a place notably diverse, proud, and affable, but also vulnerable to economic, social, and environmental pressures, much like other small communities across the United States.

All photographs are from 2011 - 2012, archival inkjet prints, printed by the artist. *The Way to Wanakena* was originally on view at the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry’s Ranger School, Wanakena, New York. The project is supported by the Tang Teaching Museum, the Skidmore College MALS program, especially the Helene and Frank Crohn Scholarship, and the SUNY-ESF Ranger School. The artist extends a special thanks to the residents of Wanakena for their enthusiastic support. More on the project can be found at www.thewaytowanakena.com
Remarks
Kristin V. Rehder
Opening of The Way to Wanakena Exhibit
Saturday, September 1, 2012
3:00 p.m., The SUNY-ESF Ranger School

Thank you so much, Mariann, and hello everyone.

I am thrilled that we are here together. Thank you so much for coming. I’d like to thank my partner, Sue Washburn. Love makes all things possible. Special thanks to the Ranger School for all that the team here has done to provide a wonderful venue and to make this exhibit happen. I’d like to recognize Sandy Welter, my program advisor at Skidmore, who drove up from Saratoga Springs to be here today, and to acknowledge the Master’s in Liberal Studies program at Skidmore. And, not least, I’d like to give special recognition to the 34 people who agreed to be photographed and interviewed for this project. Could I ask those of you who are here to stand?

In the next 15 minutes or so I’d like to talk a bit about my journey as a student in the cultural history of photography, explain to you what The Way to Wanakena attempts to do as a project focused on the concept of community, and ask for your help since this project continues through the fall. I know many of us would like to get down to the fiddlers at 4, so I’ll move it along.

When I first began my studies, I was fascinated by how photography was invented, how it spread around the world, and who used it for what purposes. Very early both men and women used the camera to record different communities—some examples would be Edward Curtis’s famous photographs of the North American Indian. Or the work of Frances Benjamin Johnston with the African-American community at the Hampton Institute in Virginia. Gregory Bateson, married to Margaret Mead, and working in Bali, was one of the first ethnographers to use extensive photography, to the tune of 25,000 images, to study another community and culture.

Of course, eventually, the camera was often employed to make images with a socially activist message, attempting to create change or support certain causes. Many historians refer to this as concerned photography. A great example of it is the work of Lewis Hine on child labor. Not so well known is the work of Japanese-born George Masa, who photographed in the Great Smoky Mountains and was a major player in helping the public understand the necessity of protecting that land as a national park. Many of us know the work of the Farm Security Administration, or FSA, photographers, who were sent out around the country in the 1930s and ’40s to record images of the Depression to support Roosevelt’s New Deal agenda. Dorothea Lange’s Migrant Mother is perhaps the most famous of these images. The powerful imagery of the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War also come to mind.
From this very brief introduction we see that the camera has been used to record, or document, individual people and places, including whole communities and movements, and also to bring attention to certain issues. And, it's important to understand that photographs can help us learn—can expand on an idea—an idea such as memory or identity or patriotism or human migration. For me, a major idea throughout my studies has been this concept of community. What do we mean by community?

Well, let’s look specifically at Wanakena. It’s not just a geographical community of roughly 530 acres, 160 of which is water. Or 160 permanent and seasonal dwellings, according to the county planning office, or a population that varies between 50 and maybe 200, depending on the time of year. And it’s not just a community of people with shared interests, a unique history, a certain pride in how we got here and how we survived. It’s a living, breathing, functioning community, that can shape itself in many different ways, depending on our level of engagement and commitment.

So let me see if I can demonstrate some of how this concept of community can be interpreted specifically through photography. (Lift the camera.) Here I am with my camera and we are at a community event and I will simply record the event. (Click across the room). But, here we are, and I have the notion that I want to photograph more of the idea of community, as I might perceive it—let’s say the community engaging with each other. So I ask you to say hello to the person next to you (everyone please say hello), and I photograph that moment. (Click across the room again.) But, let’s say I decide that I don’t want to determine ahead of time what community means, I want the camera to help me learn. So I photograph some aspect of community from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m.—maybe I shoot at the porch of the general store, for example. And then I blow up the images and I study them. I take notes on everything I notice. I form some hypotheses about what I am seeing, and I return to take some more pictures to test if my assumptions are correct. What I have just described, albeit quickly, is inductive, follows a methodology, and is known as visual ethnography.

But, let’s say I take an even different approach. Let’s say I decide to learn something about community, but instead of taking photographs of a lot of people together doing an activity, I merge art and ethnography. I take a series of individual portraits. And, in addition, I ask people to sit down and have a conversation about this specific community, Wanakena—how they came to be here, what they like about it, what concerns them for the future, and so on. And what if I add to that a little twist? What if I hang all those photographs, 24 of them along with people’s own words, on a wall somewhere and invite the entire community to come and see the images, read the text, and respond? Now I have a very different kind of project. Now I have a project that for me is deeply meaningful because there is dialogue, because there is consequence.

Let me tell you a bit about what I learned in the interview part of this process. And then I'd like to come back and talk for a moment about the significance that the portraits themselves have in this study.
Some background: There were 34 people interviewed in the 24 portraits since some were in a single portrait and some in pairs. 24 of the 34 were year-rounders and 10 seasonal. There were two kids younger than 12 and the rest of the kids were in their '20s into their '80s. I chose people for the mix, and for their availability, sometimes on the spur of the moment. Interviews were not just on the topic of Wanakena but were also about personal histories.

On the topic of the Wanakena community, the top four positives, in order, for those interviewed were:

- First, **location**, and by that we mean recreation and all the things you can do here, wilderness, and the natural beauty and the contrast of seasons.
- The second positive, ironically, is **community**, as in—we are a community, we are friendly, we are on a first-name basis, people will help you no matter who you are, Wanakena is home.
- Third, **Wanakena is a great place to raise kids**—it’s a safe environment where the kids can be happy and where they can learn important life lessons.
- And fourth, there is a strong sense of connection to, distinction of, and pride in the **Ranger School**.

The top four concerns were:

- First, **attracting more year-rounders and families with kids** (in this category are the many related subsets: affordable housing, desirable and available property, jobs, quality education, technology, and keeping the hospital)
- The second was **the difficulty of running a business or doing business here**, with issues such as remoteness, technology, resistance to development, difficulty of attracting new business)
- Third, people **bringing city ways to the country or wanting city conveniences**
- Fourth, **not wanting too many people to discover Wanakena** or for Wanakena to expand too much

Let me note here that one of the reasons I did a project in the social-activist tradition is this. I am idealistic enough and socially minded enough to believe that a community like ours has the ability to work together to create the positive future that we want to see. So I used the camera to teach me more about this community and to help me test some of those ideas. I want to be clear that I don’t think this project is in any way the sole instigator of positive change or advancement for Wanakena or even the broader community. It is a contributor to everything else that is going on here, historical tours, music on the green, the Ranger School centennial, fundraising for the church building and the hospital, economic development, broader discussions about the future of the Park...everything. Ultimately, however, it is not what I think but what you think about what you see and experience in **The Way to Wanakena** that matters.
Let me now make a few quick comments about why I did this show in portraits.

Portraits are powerful, aren’t they? Especially, for me, they are often most meaningful when they adopt a straightforward, unaffected style; when you are looking into someone’s eyes; when the photographs are not highly stylized or perfected or sentimentalized; and when they have no commercial purpose. Rendered this way, they help me as a viewer, just like you, establish a certain relationship with the person I am looking at. I have time, in a fast-paced world where images swirl around us so quickly and so impermanently, to spend some time with a person in a portrait—to think about who that person really is, what he or she values, where I am like the person or where I differ. Good photographic portraits have often been thought to capture something of a person’s soul. Whether that’s true or not, I meet the person’s eyes and I am engaged; I am often transformed. This happens to me when I look at the image of Polly Hamele in this show. I feel that she is asking us what we will do to honor this community. I feel that she is our guardian angel. And I feel she raises each of us who see her very honest gaze to a higher standard. That’s how powerful a portrait can be for me.

Portraits of individuals also signify of course that while we are part of a community, we are each responsible individually for our actions and we each have personal power and authority—our own special voice—to create change. And I like the idea of shooting and showing portraits, because once they are hanging there, I, as the photographer, move away and what is important then is the relationship you have to that person when you gaze into those eyes. What is your commitment as a fellow member of a community to work with that person for the future of this or any place? And since the people who are in this show are only representatives of all of us (I could have photographed any 34 people), what if that were your face there instead? How would you want people to relate to you—to cooperate with you on issues that matter?

Now, you can help me and all of us continue this exploration of community by taking just a moment to fill out a very quick survey. Since the show is moving from here to the Tang Teaching Museum at Skidmore in Saratoga Springs in October, I will be speaking again but to a different audience. And I would like to be able to share your reactions to this project to help spark their own feelings about community. So we’ll pass out the survey and a pencil that you should feel free to keep. Your answers are anonymous. The surveys can be dropped off in or near the big box. And as soon as you are done, we can gather for refreshments or head back to the show or off to the fiddlers. I’ll be around to answer any questions and to chat. Also, please note that there is a website with all the photos and written material at www.thewaytowanakena.com

It’s been my privilege to do this project. I’ve learned so much. And I’d like to leave you with a final thought: If I had wanted to take a photograph of ever person who is important to the Wanakena community, I would have needed to take everyone’s picture.
Thank you so much, again, for coming today.
Thank you, and my special thanks to the Tang—

- To John, Ian, Rachel, Megan, Patrick, and so many others here for exhibiting this work and for hosting all of us today. I am so proud to be part of the Tang’s tradition of teaching and of supporting student and faculty art and scholarship at Skidmore.
- Thank you to each of you here for joining us. You can’t imagine what it means to me.
- To my partner, Sue Washburn, you have stood beside me every step of the way. Thank you with all my heart. You are my first, my primary community.
- To my brother, sister-in-law and niece who have traveled here today, to the Master of Arts in Liberal Studies program at Skidmore and especially to Michael Mudrovic and Sandy Welter, to my amazing advisor and mentor Katie Hauser, to my teacher and friend Rik Scarce, to Frank and Helene Crohn for the scholarship that helped enable this work, and to Skidmore graduate and long-time trustee Sara Schupf and Axel Schupf—my champions.
- And most especially to the people of Wanakena who have supported this project whole-heartedly. Not a single person that I asked to participate in *The Way to Wanakena* said no.
- Thank you to each and all.

Today, I would like to speak to you from a very personal perspective about
The Way to Wanakena. If you don’t mind I will use my notes as reference. I have a number of points to make that I don’t want to miss.

In the spirit of a degree in liberal studies, I first offer a poem by Mary Oliver, the Pulitzer prize-winning poet, whose work has helped me see the world differently. And more connectedly. This poem is from the book Evidence and is titled “I want to write something so simply.” I think Ms. Oliver might forgive me if I suggest that the poem relates as easily to the showing of a photograph as to the writing of a poem.

I want to write something
so simply
about love
or about pain
that even
as you are reading
you feel it
and as you read
you keep feeling it
and though it be my story
it will be common,
though it be singular
it will be known to you
so that by the end
you will think—
no, you will realize—
that it was all the while
yourself arranging the words,
that it was all the time
words that you yourself,
out of your own heart
had been saying.
This poem starts us off imagining **community**, the subject of my project, at a very intimate level. That though we are **singular**—each with her or his own story—we share common experiences, life lessons held by all of us. That we speak a shared language of humanity. Such commonality—that sense of things we understand together—is central to *The Way to Wanakena*. I will come back to it, especially when I speak about why I have explored community through a series of individual portraits.

The project that you are looking at here is of a very different ilk from photography that documents the brokenness of our social structures. Its straightforwardness and simplicity perhaps belie its potential impact. I would like to make a case for what you are seeing.

Throughout my studies in the cultural history of photography I have been especially interested in two themes. One is the relationship of photography and community, and the other is photography’s role in social activism. Obviously, the two often cross over.

Very early both men and women used the camera to record and interrogate different communities—some examples would be Edward Curtis’s famous photographs of the North American Indian. Or the work of Frances Benjamin Johnston with the African-American community at the Hampton Institute in Virginia. Gregory Bateson, famously married to Margaret Mead, and working in Bali, was one of the first ethnographers to use extensive photography, to the tune of 25,000 images, to study another community and culture. A more contemporary example would be the work
of Korean-born and pseudo-named Nikki S. Lee. Her “Projects” involve actually immersing herself in, and then being photographed as, a member of various groups—Hispanics, skateboarders, punks, the elderly. And she visually provokes myriad questions about community, including, at the very least, Who’s in? and Who’s out?

Of course, almost from its beginnings, the camera has been employed to make images with a social-activist message, attempting to create change or support certain causes. Many historians refer to this as concerned photography. A familiar example of it is the work of Lewis Hine on child labor. You may also know the images of the Farm Security Administration, or FSA, photographers, who were sent out by Roy Stryker in the 1930s and ’40s to record images of the Depression in order to support Roosevelt’s New Deal agenda. Dorothea Lange’s Migrant Mother is perhaps the iconic FSA photograph. Today, the photographs of Zoe Strauss from her Philadelphia Public Art Project, which she famously displayed under Interstate 95, give ordinary citizens access to art.

Issues of community and social activism came together palpably for me in a course I took with Rick Chrisman on Religious Revolutionaries. For this course I wrote a paper on Martin Luther King, Jr.’s, concept of the “beloved community” and how that idea was represented in civil rights photography. The basis of King’s position on the “beloved community” lay in the worth of the individual, recognition of the other, radical societal change in human rights, non-violent protest, and a broadening effort to create a fellowship of humankind in the present day, not belatedly in the hereafter.
Looking at imagery from the civil rights movement, I observed that some of the photographers tried to represent community by shooting groups of people in action. The images were of marches, protests, rallies, and people working together on community projects. My sense, however, as a viewer, was one of distance; it was often hard to feel invested in the actual people pictured in these activities—to feel the possibility of a specific relationship or level of understanding being formed. Surprisingly, I discovered a kind of prototype for *The Way to Wanakena* in mug shots of the civil rights Freedom Riders. Freedom Riders rode into the South on Greyhound and Trailways buses in the ‘60s to protest racial segregation in terminals serving buses that crossed state lines. When they arrived in Jackson, Mississippi, they were immediately arrested by officials and photographed in mug shots. When I saw a montage of these mug shots, published decades later, and accompanied by testimonials—men and women, old and young, Caucasian and African American, secular and religious—the combination of their faces created a palpable expression, for me, of how community identity and activism works.

Thus I rendered the Wanakena community in portraits, because I had begun to understand that seeing someone face-to-face in a photographic image—*engaging the gaze*—challenges the viewer to attempt to know that person more intimately. Then, reading about the “other” allows greater perspective, possibly appreciation and tolerance. Imagining oneself on the wall—the exchange of position in a cross-section of community portraits—can encourage the idea that members of a community are on the same
level, have equal voice, and thus have important individual roles to play in participating in and advancing the good of the community. In this kind of project, which is social activist in nature, I believe straightforward portraits that are not aestheticized, that put you eye-to-eye with the subject, and that are made with no intent to sell are a powerful catalyst.

But a catalyst for what? Well, let me speak for a moment about Wanakena specifically. Wanakena, New York, a place that Sue and I love dearly and where we have a seasonal home, is a hamlet about three hours from here in the upper northwest section of the Adirondack Park. It was a planned community, constructed in 1902 by cousins Horace and Herbert Rich, who brought their lumber company to the shores of the Oswegatchie River. With the Rich Lumber Company came housing, hotels, mills, shops, services, a church, a railroad, and a 171-ft suspension footbridge. At one time up to 2,000 people lived in a bustling Wanakena. But after the lumber company left and the local mills and mines later closed, the hamlet dwindled to its present number of just 50 year-rounders—a number that swells to maybe 200 people in the summer. Wanakena is a geographical community of roughly 530 acres, 160 of which are water. It has 160 permanent and seasonal dwellings. We have a distinguished Ranger School that was built on land donated by the Rich Lumber Company 100 years ago.

A notable difference about Wanakena is that about 30 years ago a gay male couple from Syracuse bought a key historic house in the hamlet and fixed it up. Their friends—gay and straight—began to do the same. Wanakena therefore, while not racially diverse, is diverse in many ways—socio-economically and politically, in age and gender, and in year-rounders and
seasonal residents. It was an excellent place to do a study on community. And, of course, I had the added benefit of living in the Adirondacks for several months.

The question for Wanakena is: Can we rally our considerable sense of pride, our common investment in life on the river, and our desire to see Wanakena persist in order to tackle some difficult challenges—challenges like helping our store, our restaurant, and our little post office survive; gaining access to technology; warding off aquatic invasives; preventing taxes from forcing some residents out, and complying with Adirondack Park regulations. Wanakena joins many other small communities across the Park in dealing with these kinds of issues. I am sure some of you have encountered similar issues where you live.

So this project is an attempt to use the arts to encourage and contribute to discourse in Wanakena about what kind of community we want to be and how we can work together even better. I photographed and interviewed 34 people—a cross-section of the community in singles and pairs—and interviewed each participant so that I could create the testimonial panels. There were 24 photographs altogether; you are seeing a selection of 9. The Ranger School created a corridor gallery for me to hang the exhibit, and on September 1 the show opened to the Wanakena community. More than 150 people came that day. In total, more than 500 people saw the show in Wanakena during September. Visitors for the opening crowded the corridor, notably hungry to see the photographs and to read the text; 120 people stayed for my remarks and almost 90 filled out a questionnaire.
about the exhibit. All along this project has been informed by my studies in visual ethnography with Rik Scarce. I felt a questionnaire would provide at least one way to measure the impact of the exhibit for the community. I’d like to share with you a notable finding.

The top two concerns that the 34 project participants cited in their initial interviews with me were: 1) attracting more year-rounders and families with kids; and 2) the difficulty of running a business or doing business in Wanakena. It is interesting to compare that first set of responses with answers to a question posed on the questionnaire: *What are the specific issues you feel are important to work on as a community?* Note again that the questionnaire was distributed after people saw the exhibit and heard my remarks. The first stated issue from questionnaire respondents was one that I had heard before: how to ensure economic sustainability for Wanakena. But a second and new issue that people wanted to work on emerged, tied with the first in the number of responses, and for me, quite powerful. Respondents stated it as this: acceptance of each other, tolerance, respect, open-mindedness, and welcoming diversity and diverse histories. Wow!

A line of questioning that arose from viewers of the project in Wanakena was: How are you going to keep this going? What’s next? And another was, I know it’s impossible but can you photograph everyone in the community? I feel strongly that the community needs to own the next iterations of community engagement, and I think it will. But I have an idea about how we can democratize this particular project and expand its
purview. Ten people have already agreed next summer to photograph someone in the community who was not in the original project. I will provide some guidelines for the portraits and a list of questions to ask the subjects. We’ll print the images, taken with any available camera, and hang them up with the interviews in a central location for all to see. It’s *The Way to Wanakena, Part Two*. Stay tuned!

Before I take questions I would like to close with a few thoughts. The civil rights movement showed us that positive change does not emerge through government; it begins among ourselves. If equality, stability, and sustainability are our biggest challenges as a society today, the way to address these concerns starts with asking: What can I do to make a difference? The answer is often to do something local, do something real, however small. I did not start my master’s program with the idea of constructing anything as a social activist through photography. But my work in the cultural history of photography and in visual ethnography helped me begin to see how the camera itself can be used to learn, and especially in my case, to see the “other” as authentically as possible.

*The Way to Wanakena* taught me that once I *see* the other, there is still a greater agenda. If we pursue what is interesting to us individually, we accomplish little. I believe we do owe our communities something. As a beginning, I believe we can solve problems that concern us by becoming involved with our neighbors. For though our stories be singular, we are all part of a common body. And, we are, in fact, the other.
I am Tom and Kim, David, Ray, Polly, Ethan, Kathie and Bill, Lester and Steve, Tim, and Kate. And you are too.

Thank you so much. And now I’d be happy to take a few questions.

Kristin V. Rehder
MALS 2012
kvrehder@kvrehder.com
www.thewaytowanakena.com
Findings from Interviews in Wanakena, Kristin V. Rehder, *The Way to Wanakena* Project

**Notes:**
34 people interviewed in 24 sessions, 24 year-rounders and 10 seasonal (only one interview conducted by phone; the rest were in person)

Two children under the age of 12; two recent college graduates; rest from 40s into 80s

Chosen for availability and mix: male/female, year-round/seasonal/addresses in hamlet, straight/gay, representative of some special interests (like the 90-miler) or some special status in town (like being Bill Gleason or Dave Ziemba or Polly Hamele). Not considered: income level, marital or partner status, length of time in Wanakena, or specific Ranger School connection

Interviews were not just on the topic of Wanakena but about personal histories

There were about an equal number of positives and negatives, but there were fewer times when a negative was emphasized. No negative got more than 7 mentions, while the highest positives got 19 each.

All transcriptions, not just published bios/quotes, reviewed for tallies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Top Four Positives (from greatest to least)</strong></th>
<th>Number of interviews in which emphasized at least once</th>
<th>Notes: The number reflects the fact that a positive was mentioned at least once in an interview—not how many times it was mentioned in all of the interviews or by the total number of people. There were 24 interviews.</th>
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</thead>
</table>
| **Location:** Combined Recreation, Wilderness, Natural Beauty  
  Subset: Recreational and outing opportunities in the area (spec.: fishing, hiking, hunting, camping, boating, loon watching, skiing (water and snow), snowshoeing, snowmobiling, berry-picking, canoeing, kayaking)  
  Subset: Wilderness (using it and just appreciating it)  
  Subset: Natural beauty of area/contrast of seasons | 41 19 10 12 | |
<p>| <strong>Community:</strong> Combined We are a community; we are friendly; people will help you; Wanakena is home (spec.: first-name basis, feeling part of the fabric of the community, tolerant place, feels like family, welcomed here, anyone will help you anytime no matter who you are) | 36 | |</p>
<table>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Wanakena is a great place to raise kids (combined safe environment where they can be happy and where they learn imp. life lessons)</strong></th>
<th>28</th>
<th>Caveats: Some are home schooling or sending their children as far as Canton to overcome perceived weaknesses in school system. There is some concern that Wanakena kids naively don’t know this isn’t the real world and might not function as well where it’s less safe, etc. There is some concern about isolationism for the kids because of the small numbers, remoteness of the hamlet, and lack of access to certain cultural opportunities, etc.—some ask, did we make the kids sacrifice because this was our heaven on earth?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subset: Kids growing up happy and safe; raising children in that kind of place</td>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Subset: Kids learning important lessons (how to get along, how to face challenges, how to value nature, learning to be independent, developing “good” values</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Connection to, distinction of, pride in Ranger School</strong></td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Notes: Of the 34 people interviewed, 14 have a direct Ranger School connection (alumnus/a, staff member, child or sibling of graduate, etc.)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Top Four Concerns</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Attracting more year-rounders and families with kids</strong></td>
<td>7</td>
<td><strong>Subsets:</strong> affordable housing, desirable and available property, jobs, quality education, technology, and keeping the hospital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Difficult of running or doing business</strong> (hard to run a business here (remoteness; technology in terms of high-speed internet, cell service, and support; resistance to development), difficult to attract new business in, question of whether people support the idea of business here)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>People bringing or wanting city ways in the country</strong></td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Not wanting too many people to discover Wanakena or for it to expand too much</strong></td>
<td>5</td>
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ANONYMOUS QUESTIONNAIRE  
The Way to Wanakena

Please take a moment to complete this questionnaire. Your anonymous responses will provide important information for further study, presentations, and publications. Thank you! Kristin

1. To what extent does seeing the portraits and comments in *The Way to Wanakena* influence how you feel about participating with others in addressing community issues?

2. What are the specific issues you feel are important to work on as a community?

3. If this project and presentation were repeated, what would you change?

4. Any additional comments?

Please share some information about yourself:
Your age: up to 19____ 20-39____ 40-59____ 60-79____ 80 and above____
Approximately how long have you lived in Wanakena ________________
Are you: year-round ____ seasonal ____ neighboring community member ____ visitor ____
Exhibit opening, September 1, 2012, SUNY-ESF Ranger School:

- 150 attendees (estimated)
- 118 for the remarks (actual count)
- 88 returned questionnaires (actual count)

Responses to the questionnaires by the numbers:

- **Total**: 88 returned questionnaires *(not all categories were filled out on each form; however, for consistency 88 is used below as the basis for percentages)*

- **By age**:
  - up to 19: 2 (<1%)
  - 20-39: 4 (<1%)
  - 40-59: 31 (35%)
  - 60-79: 46 (52%)
  - 80 and above: 2 (<1%)

- **By number of years in Wanakena**:
  - up to 10: 22 (25%)
  - 10-19: 20 (22%)
  - 20-39: 15 (17%)
  - 40-59: 6 (<1%)
  - 60 or more: 3 (<1%)

- **By residency**:
  - year-round: 26 (30%)
  - seasonal: 35 (40%)
  - neighboring community: 10 (11%)
  - visitor: 11 (12%)

**Note**: A copy of the questionnaire is attached as an addendum.
Responses to the questionnaires by questions asked:

- **To what extent does seeing the portraits and comments in *The Way to Wanakena* influence how you feel about participating with others in addressing community issues?**

  1. The response was almost 100% positive and included “very willing,” “strongly,” “very much encouraged to do a lot more,” “compelled,” “want to participate more,” and “opens that door further.”

  2. The sole negative response was from a visitor to Wanakena: “It still feels overwhelmingly complicated.” (60-79 years old, visiting, in area 56 years—example of data existing in records for each response)

  3. At least two responses directly addressed personal divisions that may exist, and one noted an attitudinal shift:
     - “It makes me ashamed of the negative feelings I have toward some Wanakenians.”
     - “I have softened to some members of the community.”

  4. One person deferred responsibility:
     - “As a seasonal resident, it is difficult to know my role; I look to the year-rounders—I have great respect for them.”

  5. At least three respondents cited an existing level of personal activism, yet credited the exhibit for reinforcing their position or enabling them to know that others share their position, as in the two examples below:
     - “Participation has always been part of my nature and profession. *The Way to Wanakena* reinforces and makes me appreciate my beliefs.”
     - “I’ve always felt it was important, but it is especially interesting to see how committed others are.”

  6. One person, who is in the 60-79 age bracket, said: “The portraits and comments remind me of the importance of community involvement—somewhat new for me.”

  7. Some respondents noted benefits from the exhibit, as in: being reminded to “slow down and take time to appreciate living here”; gaining “a whole new concept on photography and photos—wow!”; and “*The Way to Wanakena* makes me proud to be a member of this community.”
• **What are the specific issues you feel are important to work on as a community?**

**Note:** During the opening remarks, before the questionnaires were completed, Kristin presented a summary of the concerns that the 34 project participants cited most often in their interviews. The top four concerns were: 1) attracting more year-rounders and families with kids (in this category are the many related subsets: affordable housing, desirable and available property, jobs, quality education, technology, and keeping the hospital); 2) the difficulty of running a business or doing business in Wanakena, with issues such as remoteness, technology, resistance to development, difficulty of attracting new business); 3) people bringing city ways to the country or wanting city conveniences; and 4) not wanting too many people to discover Wanakena or for Wanakena to expand too much. Following the exhibit and remarks, it is interesting to compare that first set of data with questionnaire answers to the question: What are the specific issues you feel are important to work on as a community? Numbers 3 and 4 above are practically non-existent in the questionnaire responses, but an added issue of respecting each other and welcoming diversity now ranks at the top of the list with economic sustainability; a close second is pulling together, cooperation, and staying together when times are tough. This information suggests that the exhibit material and remarks had a demonstrable effect on viewers.

1. Two categories of responses each received 15 mentions from respondents:
   - Economic sustainability and development; keeping local businesses, institutions, and services in business (Pinecone, general store, Packbasket, Ranger School, post office, concerts on the green); and ensuring employment. Two comments in this category extended the concern to the Clifton-Fine area and across the Adirondacks. **Note:** As is the case with all other questions, answers came from a cross-section of the respondents in terms of year-rounders and seasonals with varying lengths of years in Wanakena, and from visitors and members of neighboring communities.
   - Acceptance of each other, tolerance, respect, open-mindedness, and welcoming diversity and diverse histories. As noted above, this is a major addition to the outcomes of the project. One respondent wrote: “We are one.” Another wrote: “Avoid fear and exclusion.”

2. A third significant category of response (12 mentions) centered on a sense of family, cooperation, pulling together, staying together in tough times, and relying on community and neighbors in a remote area to “get us through.” One person noted the importance of “understanding how each of us can impact the other.” Another mentioned “maintaining the small family feeling.”

3. Education was a notable category with 8 specific comments, including: improving school curricula, creating competitive education that incorporates technology, and increasing respect for teachers.

4. Under environment, 7 responses mentioned: preserving the beauty and well being of the environment, supporting “forever wild,” managing development with regard to the forest and water, and protecting the wilderness.
5. The next highest response area related to keeping Wanakena, Wanakena. Responses included: preserving our richness and heritage; maintaining our character while also maintaining our economic viability; preserving older structures; and “keeping Wanakena interesting to its children so they take part in maintaining its character.”

6. In total, there were specific issues of concern mentioned in over 30 separate categories. In addition to those noted above, the categories included, but were not limited to: attracting young families, striking the right balance in year-rounders and seasonals, developing a future vision for Wanakena, keeping Wanakena safe, continuing to support community events so that we get to know each other, creating positive relationships with neighboring communities, and involvement of the church in the town.

- **If this project and presentation were repeated, what would you change?**

1. The most common response to this question was “nothing.” Attendees gave very positive marks overall to the project and presentation.
2. The most common suggestion was to present photos in the talk, especially to demonstrate examples of social activist photography.
3. The second most common suggestion was to try to photograph additional members of the community, for example: everyone, some older members who were not included, or a second round of 34 people in a representative mix.
4. At least two respondents wanted to see representation from neighboring communities.
5. Another category of response related to audience participation: time for Q&A or hearing from those photographed/interviewed about their experiences.
6. Establishing a preference that photographic portraiture should be a perceived direct “likeness” of the subjects and their personalities, one person suggested taking pictures of people as they are, specifically mentioning “glasses” and “grumpiness.” Note: This would be an interesting discussion point as it engages the issue of representation and interpretation by the artist, subject, and viewer.
7. Several requests were made, including: to publish a book of the project, to post questionnaire results on the website, and to shorten the text.
8. A number of suggestions have influenced plans for the second exhibit and gallery talk on October 18, such as: providing more history on Wanakena; including a Q&A (in Wanakena, due to scheduling constraints, Kristin offered to answer questions individually); and giving a more specific explanation of how each person was chosen.
• **Any additional comments?**

1. There is a clear desire among some respondents to see the project develop further: “You did a great job of starting the community discussion. What’s next?” Or, “How can you insure follow through?” Or, “Please continue!!”

2. Some people reframed *The Way to Wanakena* in their own words in ways that reflect their understanding and assimilation of the project’s stated purpose. *(Note: Had it not been for the questionnaires, this social-activist effect would not have been readily apparent.)* “The portraits and comments connect disparate generations and segments of the community and further a sense of community among those who view them. As such, the images work to motivate individuals to act on community issues.”

3. A number of respondents commented on the universality of the project and its applicability to other areas: “I have the feeling that this should be done in every community.” And, “The portraits truly show the diversity of the Wanakena community and show that the community concerns are universal.” And the prompt: “Share the community spirit of Wanakena—the spirit of selflessness as opposed to selfishness—with the rest of civilization.”

4. One person made a notable admission, which, given more time, could have led to an interesting discussion on one of the exhibit’s cornerstones: “I still struggle with the concept of community presented through individuals.”

5. One person noted that, as a result of the show, he/she wants to make Wanakena a permanent residence.

6. Accolades to the artist abounded in this section related to the quality of the photographs, the love and respect shown for the people and place, the gift of a sense of community to Wanakena, and helping people realize how fortunate they are to live in Wanakena.

7. Finally, one comment reinforced many others on the importance of including bios and quotes with the images: “Wanakena has always been a place of open conversation—a place where we can be free to express how we feel. Seeing these pictures made it seem as though the conversation was taken to a whole new level because it was put in print.”

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9/23/12
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Polly Hamele arrived in the hamlet in 1944. Married to Keith for just shy of sixty years, she raised three children, served as postmistress for more than two decades, stayed active in the church, and helped establish the cemetery. Today Polly lives next to her daughter at "The Hameles" on Main Street at the head of the Moore Trail.

"I came to Wanakena during World War II when Keith was sent to Germany. His parents, Otto and Ada Hamele, needed some support. Our son Dick was six months old, and he didn't see his father again until he was going on four. Otto told me in November when I arrived, 'If you stay here a year, you'll never want to leave.' He was right."

"When Dick was young, he wanted a boat, and Keith said he'd help him build one. They constructed it down in our cellar; I almost thought they wouldn't get it out. After that, we'd often go up to Janack's Landing, and everyone would ski. Keith made the kids their first pair of water skis."

"After my husband died, a minister came by to talk and wondered what I attributed the success of my marriage to. I said that Keith and I respected each other for what we enjoyed, apart and together. And we looked after each other."

"Today some people come to the country but hey want the conveniences of the city, because they're used to them. You can see the difference between way back when and now, but change has got to come. Still, the footbridge and the church are two things that should be preserved forever. They are very special to Wanakena."
Dave Ziemba, Wanakena’s unofficial “mayor,” enrolled at the Ranger School in 1988. He was working in management at Wegmans in Buffalo when his wife, Susan, showed him an article about the school. Soon after Dave’s graduation, the Ziembas, with their three young children in tow, bought and ran the Wanakena General Store for 18 years. Today, Susan continues as a lab technologist at the hospital. Look for Dave near the gazebo if he’s not minding the town’s systems, mowing the campground, or driving his school bus.

“I would guess everyone is drawn to Wanakena for the same reason: it’s the wilderness. That’s the one thing that ties the whole community together. That’s why I came here.”

“After we took on the store, we lived above it and my commute was walking downstairs. I was in retail since I was 12, so I knew the importance of being out there and hanging out with people, plus I enjoyed it. I’m out of the loop now, just another face in the crowd. I’m no longer ‘Dave at the store.’ That’s what I miss most.”

“One of the biggest issues for Wanakena is that there are no young families moving in. When we came, it was closer to 50-50 seasonal and full-time; now it’s at least 75 percent seasonal. There’s a long stretch between the summer people, winter and spring, and then the summer people back again. The issue is not who’s taking care of the town. You have to have enough folks living here, and to actually live here—year-round is tough.”

“I don’t think there’s anybody here that will not help out another neighbor. There’s definitely community, especially since there’s one road in and one road out. There are no drive-throughs in Wanakena.”

“Nothing beats the smell of the wilderness. We would go to Buffalo and come all the way back through Star Lake, drive in on County Route 61, and as soon as we made that first turn through the scotch pine stand, everybody would take a snort, the dog would have his nose out the window, and that was it—we were home.”
Holly and Neil Woodworth weren't looking for Wanakena; it found them. Six years ago, on one of Bill Gleason's historic tours near the old mill site, Neil spotted the "for sale" sign on the cabin he and Holly now own. Neil is the executive director of the Adirondack Mountain Club. Holly is a financial and operational auditor who specializes in computer auditing. They met paddling a canoe in a freshman Phys. Ed. course at Hobart & William Smith.

Holly: "We thought we wanted our retirement home to be in the wild where the only thing we could hear was nature, but we found that we love listening to people over on the beach. It's so nice to hear them laughing and doing cannonballs, enjoying the water."

Neil: "We're much happier being part of a community, and this is a unique one. Not every place in the Adirondacks would be accepting of the director of the Adirondack Mountain Club."

Holly: "We are on a first-name basis with so many people. We'll go into the Pinecone and people we've never been introduced to will say, 'Hello Neil. Hello Holly.'"

Neil: "There is a willingness among the people who have bought vacation homes here to get involved when the community's threatened. There are so many places in the Adirondacks where the summer folks are not part of the community. Wanakena is different."

Holly: "If you are really attached to your place, as opposed to just living in the suburbs, and if you really love where you live, then you have to do something to try to keep the place thriving."

Neil: "Across the Adirondacks, outside of Lake Placid or Lake George or Old Forge, there is an everyday fear of losing the post office or the grocery or the local restaurants, which threatens tourism and recreation—the greatest resources left in this park. I think this community has a better chance of surviving. We have good highway access, and broadband and cellular are coming. Can we keep our anchor points?"
**Ray Keith** came to Wanakena full-time after retiring from the Syracuse police department in 1986, but the Oswegatchie has always been his real home. A three-time recipient of the Purple Heart who also won two Bronze Stars for valor, Ray served in Vietnam in the late ’60s during the Tet Offensive, where he was exposed to Agent Orange. A few years ago, Ray’s cancerous throat was entirely removed; he uses an artificial voice box to speak. Ray and his wife, Judy Hastings, have been married for four years. Ray’s father, Herbert Keith, wrote the definitive book on Wanakena, *Man of the Woods*.

"I was born in Brooklyn, and my parents brought me to Wanakena in 1949 when I was just a little guy. Our first house was at Yale Point, near where Judy and I live on the Narrows. The only thing left of the old hunting camp, which was the earliest known structure in these parts, is a set of stairs."

"To give you some idea of how much I've always liked Wanakena, in my last year of high school I wouldn't go on my senior trip to Washington, D.C. I skipped out and went trapping instead. When I graduated, I got a 17-foot Grumman canoe and a Johnson motor with a stone fork on it. I used it to go up and down the river."

"When I was growing up, people understood the woods and they used them in a different way. Today you follow the path, come back, and they give you your badge. But when we were kids, we had favorite camps in there where we stayed on our own, places like Ward’s Camp and Skip’s Camp."

"I'd tell young people today to turn off the TV and the computer and try to spend as much time in the natural world as you can—go camping, go fishing, go exploring—because being in the woods will teach you how to take care of yourself for the rest of your life."

"The best thing about Wanakena now is that you can still find the wilderness when you need it."
Ethan Johnston, ten years old, was born in Moscow, Idaho. When he was six, his mother, Mariann, joined the faculty at the Ranger School, which brought Ethan, his younger brother Elijah, and his father, Dick, to Wanakena from New Hampshire. Mariann is a specialist in forest ecology and natural resources management; Dick is the land protection specialist for the Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust in Watertown. The Johnstons live on campus with their dog, Lucky.

"I was nervous about moving to Wanakena because when I meet new kids, I'm pretty shy. I got to know Aidan and Antonio, who went to my school. After that, things worked out."

"There are five roads in Wanakena if you don't include the Ranger School Road. I like it here because it's small, there are a lot of trees, and I have really good friends."

"In school I get interested in something and then I get interested in something else. First I was obsessed with horses, then war, then paintings. Then I was obsessed with science and astronomy. Now I am obsessed with orca whales. I never know what's going to be next."

"My favorite things to do in Wanakena are: first, run around in the field and go nuts; second, play in the woods; third, biking around. It's the same as what I like to study: it goes on from different things to different things. I like hockey. And scootering. And watching baseball. In winter, I like to go sledding."

"I've always considered Wanakena to be a nice place to live. Everyone pretty much gets along."

"This year is the Ranger School's 100th birthday. I really like the Ranger School. It's a neat place for forest technology."

"My advice for somebody my age who would be moving to Wanakena is: just don't bother people when they don't want to be bothered."
**Tom Bietz and Kim Schneider**, in Wanakena since 1997, lived in Niagara County where Kim worked in human services and Tom put in 12-hour days for 35 years in a carbon graphite plant. Kim, a traditional rug hooker, runs Schneider Camp Services. Tom enjoys fishing and hunting.

Tom: "A long journey brought us here. We started camping in Cranberry, bought a camp there, then met people in Wanakena. Eventually we bought Rena Sulloski's place on the water here in Wanakena.

Kim: "At night, Tom will often get me down to the dock to look up at the stars. Most of the time we are just in awe."

Tom: "We're all pretty much the same in this part of the world. Why would you come up here if you didn't love the out-of-doors? For me, every day here is a perfect day."

Kim: "Because only 50 or so of us are here year-round, I sense that people kind of hold back a little. If there's a problem, you still have to get along."

Tom: "What I don't want to see happen is a change, for example in property taxes, that would force people out. Everybody fears they'll be taxed out, but I hope those who are here can stay until they choose to leave."

Kim: "Tom is not so worried about the rest of the world. He says the rest of the world moves along. He just wants to be a good dad and a good husband. He does his part around here to keep the environment clean. He's tidy. He doesn't pollute the river. We feel it's important for every person who loves Wanakena to act responsibly. When you do the right things yourself, that is a significant contribution."

Kim: "On any day, we'll make some sandwiches and head out on the lake. We go way out in the middle of nowhere and shut the motor off and drift. At some point Tom always says, 'We're lucky dogs.' I agree."
**Lester Allen and Steve Moyer** discovered their house in Wanakena (one of the hamlet’s original five) in 1982 after a two-year search. Their classic Adirondack home was built for Rich Lumber’s general manager. Lester—a self-declared salvager—also began to buy, restore, and sell other properties, working to preserve the hamlet’s historic distinction. Growing up in the summers on Raquette Lake, Steve was drawn to Wanakena’s natural beauty. Lester and Steve celebrate 40 years together this year, 30 of them with Wanakena in the mix.

Lester: "In the beginning the year-rounders didn't want outsiders. I thought it was fair to leave everything on the market for at least a year before I bought. I just sensed that if we could get it going and fix up the properties, everybody would benefit, whether local or seasonal."

Steve: "Our seven-bedroom house has seen many guests from all walks of life over the years. It actually became legend in Syracuse: be careful if you visit Wanakena because there's something in the water, and before you know it, you'll be buying property."

Lester: "I was a farm boy from Williamstown. Early on, I developed a positive attitude that if I set my mind to something, it’s attainable. That’s why I try to help people, because I believe there’s nothing you can’t accomplish if you put your mind to it and believe in it."

Steve: "Lester has no need to be front and center. He's more a behind-the-scenes person. But he's very giving."

Lester: "Most people would say, however, that I'm extremely frugal and an old cheapskate."

Lester: "A perfect day in Wanakena used to be working with Chuck Cassidy to tear down a wall or fix a foundation. Now it’s sitting on the porch with my feet up, seeing people looking to find a place here. That’s pleasing to me, because I tried to think of the local community and wanted this to happen, and it has."

Steve: "There's an old saying: 'When you seek happiness for yourself, it's elusive, but when you seek it for others, you often find it.' "
Kathie and Bill Nevil, both natives of Cooperstown, never met until he came home from Texas for a brief vacation. Introduced then, they eventually married in Cut and Shoot, Texas. The Ringling Bros. circus "fat lady" was maid of honor and the lion keeper was best man. A few years later, they moved to Wanakena. After their 1930s schoolhouse burned to the ground in 2006, they built on the same footprint.

Bill: "In 1983, I quit my job with the railroad in Texas and we moved to Wanakena so I could attend the Ranger School. Kathie worked at the Pinecone for Fred. Even though I already had a bachelor's degree before I came here, this is the school I got the most out of."

Kathie: "Bill graduated second in his class and took a job surveying in Woodstock, N.Y., but we missed Wanakena and decided to come back. I worked at the Ranger School as an admissions counselor, and Bill eventually joined the Department of Transportation. We're like so many people who have come to the school, loved it here, and then looked for a job so they could stay. We're just not city people at all."

Kathie: "When we had the house fire, Bill wasn't home. He had gone to see his mom, who was very sick. She died the next day. It was a pretty wild twenty-four hours. Everyone was here helping. The generous people in Wanakena and the surrounding area came to our rescue. They provided a place to live, clothes, food—really everything we needed and then some."

Bill: "Being given a place to live meant so much. I had a suitcase full of clothes but Kathie didn't have anything. The support from the community was great. I'd like to think you'd find that anywhere, but I'm not sure."

Kathie: "People in Wanakena don't care where you come from or who you were before you got here. It's who you are now that matters."
Piet Visscher, commissioned lay pastor of the Western Adirondack Presbyterian Church, is building a geodesic dome house on Fourth Street, and will move from Hammond, New York, to Wanakena in the coming year. In 1991, after retiring from the Navy and his work as a submarine officer with a specialty in engineering and navigation, Piet went on to earn a master's degree in Christian education. In coming to Clifton-Fine he's taken on a new navigational challenge of, as he puts it, "trying to lead people into discovering what God is calling us to do and be."

"There is a very diverse population of folk here, from a political spectrum, religious spectrum, almost any spectrum you want to think of. Somehow people here have accepted that. They may not totally agree with it you know, but they say: 'Alright, this is what we have, and this is fine.'"

"Otto Hamele had a vision that has sustained Wanakena down through the years. Something grew out of that wisdom that just says, 'No, we're not going to give up. We're going to keep this community no matter what. Wanakena is important to us.'"

"In creating human beings, God gave them a role. We are responsible for taking care of the environment and are beholden to God for how we do it. There's an incredible beauty here in Wanakena that calls us to be exceptional stewards of creation."

"I think the community sees the church building in Wanakena as an icon—an icon that somehow represents that God is here. In all the chaos of the world, this was always the place you could come and get reassurance that God was with us. That is good, but the difficulty is that the church then becomes a building, a location, a place. The church really is the people. And it's not just the people gathered here, it's the people wherever they are. One of the challenges the church has is to be the church here and there."
Caren and Brian Donovan swiftly skim the river in their racing canoe. Blink and they are gone, training in summer on the Oswegatchie and Cranberry Lake for the annual Adirondack 90-miler. Caren, a high school math teacher and track coach, and Brian, a land surveyor with a hydroelectric company, have been racing competitively for six seasons. Both Ranger School grads, they’ve raised their three children, Dan, Kate, and Ella, in the hamlet.

Brian: "To be good at canoe racing, you have to spend time in the boat, get your technique down, learn to read the water, and work together. Age has nothing to do with success; we’re all equal out there."

Brian: "As it was getting close to Caren’s graduation from the Ranger School, we just said, ‘You know we like Wanakena an awful lot.’ We bought our house and moved. Then we had to figure out what we were going to do for work. That’s how much we wanted to be part of this community."

Caren: "We looked as far away as Alaska, but we couldn’t fathom taking the kids anywhere else because of the people here. Later, we would sometimes wonder: ‘Did we do the right thing? Wanakena was our heaven on earth, but was it the right move for the family?’ If you ask them, our kids would say ‘absolutely.’"

Brian: "Growing up, the kids could go anywhere and do anything. If they ever had a problem, they knew they could go to any house and get assistance. They had that sense of comfort.” Caren: “I remember teaching the kids about strangers. I would say, ‘In Wanakena, you’ll know strangers if they’re stopping and gawking at the deer.’ But then I thought we should probably make it a little more worldly because in other places that’s definitely not the way you tell a stranger. In the city, we also had to teach our kids how to cross streets and use sidewalks, because here everyone just walks down the middle of the road.”
Timothy Westbrook currently resides in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where he is the Pfister Artist in Residence. A recent graduate of Syracuse University, Timothy is a fiber and performance artist whose multi-dimensional costumes and installations reflect his commitment to sustainability.

"I'm a lucky one of a select few to be a native of Wanakena. I was born here."

"One of my mother's classmates from the Ranger School took a photo of our front yard. It was a picture of an exquisite sunrise, and I have it in my studio space in Milwaukee. The picture is not of people. It's not of the general store. It's not of the swinging footbridge. It's of the river and the trees that are hugging it. Yes, I'm from Wanakena. I'm someone from the middle of the woods. This is the essence of who and what I am."

"Many movies have as their theme the notion of people trying to achieve more than they are, of going for greatness. What they often learn at the end is that they had to travel around the world to realize that everything they needed was right at home. Instead of going on the hunt, I am challenging the world to show me a paradise that I fall in love with more than Wanakena. Until that challenge has been accepted and met, I will be from Wanakena."

"As a child of Wanakena, I am the future of this place. I am not a sole, self-appointed holder of all that is Wanakena, but I need to help keep it sacred. I need to continue to tell stories about it. Growing up in our area is definitely a struggle. Yes, we are remote. But we 'raise 'em good.' We make successful members of the human race. I bring to the community proof that we can produce somebody wholesome. And since I am the legacy, I am that next step in helping to turn Wanakena into whatever it will become."
**Angie Oliver** (with Irish, the family’s fox red lab) grew up in Indiana, graduated from the University of Michigan with a double major in Western European Studies and French, and eventually landed in Vermont, where she married Rick Kovacs, a graduate of the Ranger School. In 2001 they made the momentous decision to move to Wanakena, pursuing a dream of running their own business and raising their two boys, Riczi and Brooks, in a close community. They own Packbasket Adventures and operate the Wanakena General Store. Angie is also a teaching assistant at the Clifton-Fine School, where she covers the study halls, middle school computer labs, website, and attendance records.

"We were here maybe a month and I got my kids involved in ice skating. My oldest fell and broke his arm. At the emergency room, all these people kept coming in. They had heard about the accident, and they were offering rides, food, anything. Even after his arm was in a cast and he was back home, kids came over with drawings and little bags of candy—to cheer him up and to check in on us. I was like, "Oh my gosh, who are these people? They barely know us.'"

"Rick's the starter of things. And I come in later and change and tweak and improve. I'm the fine-detail person. He's the big-picture guy. So we really pair up well that way."

"We feel there's value to the presence of a store in town. I understand that people have limited budgets and need to stretch a dollar, as I do, too. I guess I would just hope that townsfolk would be willing to buy local when possible."

"During one of the summer concerts, I came home to feed the dog. As I walked back on the opposite side of the river from where the music was playing, I had this warm feeling inside. It's also the same road where I walk my dog on a winter's night, when there's not a single car track in the snow, not a single footprint, and you can feel like you're the only person in the world here. There's always that contrast in Wanakena—that sense that it can be so opposite, and I love it both ways."
Sherm Craig, born in Rochester, New York, went to General Motors Institute to study engineering but chose education for his career. He and his wife, Annette, have lived on the Oswegatchie since 2001. They make fine and rustic furniture through their business, Wanakena Woodworks. Currently, Sherm is serving as an Adirondack Park Agency Commissioner.

"We came here for the water and the woods. While hiking, you focus on the trail, rocks, and trees, and you become one with nature. Even sitting on the porch, I find that watching the river relaxes me."

"I've never been able to see big problems and then walk away without trying to solve them."

"Wanakena has a history of ups and downs in the time that I have been coming since 1968. Our little community is supportive and will come forward to help any person or get behind important issues."

"I would like to see our seasonal residents stay longer and become more involved with community issues. The opportunity for people to work who want to live here is very limited, and it will continue to be unless we're able to make some changes."

"I am not a member of any organized religion, but I believe I have a responsibility to help people who are living here now and in the future. That is where my drive comes from, whether it has been working with kids in my career or trying to assist communities so that there is sustainability."

"Wanakena is a secret place. Once you know the people, it is a perfect combination of a small caring community with opportunity for progressive thought."
Kate Zubin-Stathopoulos has never known a summer without Wanakena in it. Born in 1986 to David Zubin and Elaine Stathopoulos, she experienced Wanakena as a child, along with her brother, Nick, from the vantage point of their family’s place on Second Street before they built their house on South Shore Road. Now living in Denver, Kate is a paleontology field specialist. Drawn to the history of the Earth, she earned a master’s in paleontology at the University of Calgary after her undergraduate years at St. Lawrence.

"My dad had a place in Wanakena, and when my parents met, my mom fell in love with it too. So it’s just always been where I’ve come. Even if I go somewhere else or I’m halfway across the world sometimes, I still want to have Wanakena to return to."

"I always notice how fast the Oswegatchie is moving. When I was younger, I had just learned to swim and for some reason the flow was high and really quick. In my child's mind it was like a raging river. I perceived that if I jumped in, I'd be carried down the entire passage, which would have been so cool. I am always waiting for it to be that high again."

"I admire the people who are here all winter, and I think I could do it, but I am sure I would get lonely. I don't mind winter, especially after living in Calgary, Alberta, but some of the issues people face here are tough because it is so isolated: heating your house, getting food, driving."

"My cabin is where I sleep when I am in Wanakena. It’s completely my space. I can do whatever I want in it. My dad helped me build it as a sort of tribute to the Second Street house, the one where all of my very young childhood memories are from."

"Being part of a community like Wanakena means giving back. So far I haven't done enough of that because I haven't been here much as an adult, but the time will come when I can participate more."
Pablo Enterrios and Timothy Westbrook, an international couple who split their time between Buenos Aires, Argentina, and Wanakena, have owned their house on Front Street since 2010. Tim's brother and sister-in-law, Chris and Sue Westbrook, and his sister, Stephanie, are in Wanakena as well. Pablo is as passionate about interior design as Tim is about architecture. Tim and Chris, Ranger School director, established Adk Compliance, a business that helps clients navigate regulatory requirements and obtain permits in the Adirondack Park.

Tim: "When I left New York and was living in Argentina, I found that part of me was missing my culture and my family. I just thought, 'Wouldn't it be nice to be in a country setting?"

Pablo: "It's a little shocking the first day or so upon arrival here, especially during black fly season."

Tim: "Being an architect, I am trying to get into my head this idea of development. In one sense I would like to design an interesting little house and have fun, but do we really need one more house? Why don't we just fix and take care of the things that are here?"

Pablo: "Wanakena is nice as it is. I am not in favor of too much development. There was a house nearby that if you saw it from the inside you would feel as if you were in a museum—a real Adirondack camp. It seemed a place that could be a landmark and significant for the community, not ever meant to be destroyed, yet the people who bought it tore it down to build something new."

Tim: "That is something about Wanakena that is special. We have a history. People here respect that."
Gail and Bob Simmons went to high school together in Star Lake. When Gail left college to move to Rochester, Bob followed her, but after their two sons were born, they moved back to Wanakena, Bob's hometown. They have seven grandchildren, including triplets, and live in one of the hamlet's original plank houses (which Bob is expertly renovating). Bob was the long-time maintenance supervisor at the Ranger School and still works there part-time. For 23 years Gail has been the office manager for the Ranger School Alumni Association. Both Gail and Bob are winners of the association's Haddock Award of Excellence.

Bob: "When the lumber company first came in and erected the mills in Wanakena, this was a very advanced community for the early 1900s, especially in a remote area. They had electrical, water, sewer, and fire standpipe systems. People stayed here because they were proud that they had this. And there has always been a desire to maintain it and to keep it strong."

Gail: "A lot of changes came because the mill and the mines closed. Families had to leave for jobs. It's more a seasonal community now."

Gail: "Wanakena could have been a ghost town when the lumber company left. And 110 years later, it really is flourishing. We protected our landmarks that are here, passed on the history. Everyone cares so about Wanakena. It's definitely a special place."

Bob: "In my lifetime, not everybody always agreed with the other person. But they respected that and they would work that out. For the good of the community, we all have to compromise, we all have to be a little less sensitive."

Gail: "And a little more tolerant."
Katie Benzel, who turns twelve this year, was one when her parents brought her to live in Wanakena. Born in Rushford, New York, she likes to read novels, hates math, and loves science. She wants to be a police officer when she grows up. Katie lives on Fourth Street with her parents, Judy, a physical therapist, and Will, a forest ranger and '82 Ranger School grad; brother Aidan; sister Karina; and the family dog, Frodo.

"My favorite book is Esperanza Rising. Esperanza starts out being really wealthy but then becomes very poor. I like how she goes through those struggles but gets over it, and she turns into a different person at the end. I admire her." "I don't really know where my determination comes from. I would never do anything that could potentially be dangerous unless I had to. I’m different from Aidan that way. He would do anything. He’s kind of competitive, so if I told him I’m going to be better than you at something, he would do it because he does not like to be beaten—ever. But I’m not really competitive. I really don’t care if I am better at something or not. Well, I think I would love to be better than Aidan at reading. That's the one thing."

"Some people I know think that girls are not supposed to work, that they are supposed to stay home and take care of the house and family. Boys are left to providing for the family. I think differently. I think a girl can work if she wants to. There have probably been times where I’ve thought I can’t do something because I’m a girl, but mostly I think it’s different now: girls have more rights. So I think that if I work hard at something, I’ll be able to do it."

"Wanakena is very outdoorsy with a lot of houses but also a lot of woods. There's a nice river that goes through it. Everybody knows each other here. What people say is that we're kind of like a Wanakena family—we care about each other."
Red and Shirley Northrup are the real deal in Wanakena. Shirley was five when her family moved here from South Edwards. After high school, she was dating Red's cousin, but Red eventually won her hand. They raised five children in Wanakena, and now they have seven grandchildren and a great grandbaby. Red worked for J&L then became buildings and grounds supervisor at the hospital. Shirley cooked for 25 years at the Ranger School. Red says he always enjoyed going to the Wanakena Store—"getting a cup of coffee with the men, sitting there lying to each other."

Red: "This was a great place to raise children. We always knew right where they were. We could hear them hollering and playing ball right across the river. When winter came, they'd be out ice skating and getting into trouble. And more trouble."

Shirley: "I remember one time the kids were all over at the ball diamond, and one of the younger ones got hit with a baseball bat. His mom leaned over and said, 'Michael, is there anything I can get you?' And he said, 'Yes, a lettuce and tomato sandwich.'"

Shirley: "The O'Connors, the Hazeltons, the Sawyers, the Bassetts—we were all pretty close. We raised our children together. We played cards. Christmas was a special time in our hearts. In those days, if somebody was going some place and they didn't have quite the right clothes to wear, we'd switch them back and forth. I'm not sure people here now are as close as we all were back then."

Red: "I've heard a lot of people say they never knew Wanakena was here. And that's good, you know, because you could bring a lot of trouble in. The way it is now it's just a family, and that's fine. I'm afraid of some people getting in here who don't care about the way we live."

Shirley: "We've liked Wanakena so well all these years that we're going to be buried here. We already have our plots."
John Rhodes graduated from the Ranger School in '66. After raising their two children in the Midwest, he and his wife, Janet, moved back to the Adirondacks from southern Indiana and eventually settled in Wanakena in 2001. John’s expertise in construction includes cost accounting, bidding, and business development in many parts of the world. Janet is an administrative assistant at the Clifton-Fine Hospital.

"The Ranger School was a really satisfying experience for me. It left an imprint."

"If you ever get in any trouble or need anything in Wanakena, you just let out a little squeal and there are people right here to help you, whatever side of the fence they're on, even for this ultra-conservative."

"Certain things come along and I chide people over these things, and I present a different approach, which normally is not at all well received. But sometimes when you see certain trends, you've got to challenge them. I guess that's just part of my makeup."

"I'm from northwestern Pennsylvania, the Allegheny National Forest, 800,000 acres of some of the best timber in the United States. There's an oil well over there, a gas well over here. In the wintertime there are areas where people can go with snowmobiles and neat little hotels out in the woods. It's a much more diverse use of the land, but nature itself is so all-encompassing that it absorbs all of that. And so I come from that, and everything may not be exactly to my liking, but I've seen something different, you know?"

"While I was in the construction business, I really got into this teaming thing, which was all about the elimination of the negative side of ego—take no credit, give all credit, and value the idea. That makes your world so much easier if you can adopt that, and so much more satisfying."
Rhody Lea and her daughter, Pam Lea-Maida, trace their family’s love for Wanakena to Grandma and Grandpa Lea (parents of Rhody’s husband, Bill) who owned the "crooked house" on Sixth Street. In 1980 Bill and Rhody built their own camp on South Shore Road, where Rhody lives today. Recently, Pam moved to Wanakena full-time to champion Rhody’s independence, leaving behind her D.C.-based work with wounded warriors and their families. Her photo props for newborns are an on-line home run. Pam and her brother, Gregg, who died of cancer in 1977, grew up in the spell of Wanakena, boating, hiking, and berry picking, as did Pam’s two children.

Rhody: "I first came to Wanakena in 1951, and I loved it from the very start. We honeymooned at the 'crooked house.' There were no bathroom facilities. There was no heat. My father-in-law had carved a little sign above a back bedroom that said 'honeymoon suite.'"

Pam: "One of the first things I noticed here is how dark it is, so beautifully dark. When it narrows down to fewer than fifty year-rounders, it’s a hearty group of people. You have to find a way to get through these tough winters, find the magic of this place for yourself."

Rhody: "Yes, it’s remote, but you do have people, and people are very caring here. We have it set up so that we check to see if anyone needs something. Everybody pitches in."

Pam: "The people who come here like the wilderness. My concern is the changes in permissions from land that was never buildable to land that is. That is haunting for me. Hopefully, wise minds, caring minds will be sure that development doesn’t go off boundary. You don’t want Wanakena to be turned into a thoroughfare. It needs to stay wild. It needs to stay beautiful like it is."
Bill Gleason is a retired marine who served in Vietnam and Desert Storm. In 1990 he won gold and silver medals in the javelin and shot put at the Vancouver Gay Games. A gentle giant with a love of history, Bill helped establish Wanakena's walking tour. You can often find him fishing from his boathouse near the town dock early on a summer morning. He and his partner, Ron Capone, together for 44 years, have spent 22 seasons in Wanakena.

"We visited here on and off in the '80s. We thought Wanakena was beautiful. We bought our first place on the corner of First Street in 1990."

"After the summer games in Vancouver, we returned to New York to learn that Iraq had invaded Kuwait. I was a master gunnery sergeant in the marine reserves' eighth tank battalion out of Syracuse. In November I took an advance party from my battalion to Saudi Arabia to get things set up. Ron came to Wanakena and worked on our house and had it ready when I returned in April of '91."

"When we first arrived in Wanakena, the church bell would ring, but it wouldn't be Sunday. Snoopin' around, we realized that when that bell went off, you put on your boots and grabbed a shovel and met down at the store. We'd go looking for leaks in the water system because the pressure was down. That's an old hometown kind of thing, and you don't get it anywhere on earth but in a gem like Wanakena. It's that type of atmosphere that really stuck to us."

"I think this is a great place to grow up, whether you are four, forty, or eighty years old. You can be part of a community here. Sure, we have our little tits and tats; you get that on earth no matter where you are. But in Wanakena we handle it. We adapt. We move on."
Ken and Ashley Maxwell united East and West Coasts when they married last year by the river. They first met in 2010 at the Pinecone. Ken, born and raised in Wanakena, is a mechanic and snowplow driver for the highway department. Ashley runs her own business, Hair by Ashley, based at their home on Ranger School Road. They live on property that has been in Ken's family for decades. In winter they like to snowmobile, even as far as Old Forge, which Ken says you can get to quicker by sled than by car.

Ashley: "I love the quietness of winter. It's just a different feeling. It's fresh and cold. You can see for miles."

Ken: "I met Ashley, and we hit it off. We saw each other for just two days, but we stayed in touch for the next two months. After that, I went to California and drove her back. As far as I'm concerned, that's the best choice I ever made."

Ashley: "It feels like I left my family, which is very close, and gained a whole new family in Wanakena."

Ken: "Wanakena is an old-time logging town. It's a great place to live, but some people are bringing their city ways here and are changing the country ways. You make the community work by working with each other. We have to keep talking, keep trying. We can't just put up walls and say we're not going to do something."

Ashley: "This community works together, and when I opened my salon, the wonderful people here came to support me. It's the way Wanakena is, and I'm glad to be part of this community."
Wayne Allen and his wife, Karen, spent three years in Germany in the '70s where Wayne served as an Army combat engineer. The next chapter of their lives brought them to the Ranger School. Wayne studied forestry; Karen, known as "the cookie lady," sold treats in the dorms. Loving Wanakena, they stayed on and Wayne was appointed to the faculty. A few years ago, he resurrected the school's maple sugaring operation. Wayne and Karen, who works in food services at the Ranger School, raised a son in Wanakena.

"When Karen and I moved to Wanakena, the winters were harsh, so the whole concept of community togetherness—of community spirit—was very strong. We really liked that feeling, and we still have it here."

"I didn't know anything about maple syrup production when I came here. I'm from Baltimore. I grew up on King Cane syrup. You pour it out of the bottle, and it takes five minutes to get to your pancakes. To make our maple syrup, you take sap that looks like water from a tree and you process it into syrup with a beautiful amber color. It's an art and science mixed together. Making syrup has been a part of the Ranger School's history from its beginning."

"A concern of mine is that being a part of this Adirondack park is a great thing, but it's not been very easy for those who live within the park. I have some issues with the 'forever wild' concept. I believe it can be used as a tool of exclusivity, of trying to keep people out. One of the things I'd like to see back here is business. We need to make this a place where everybody can live, and where everybody can have a chance to make a go of it."

"If you see Wanakena today, it's hard to envision it back in 1902 when there were 2,000 people here. You don't get that industrial, busy feeling today. I commend Bill Gleason and the historical association for getting people to open up their history so we can know who we are, what we were."
Kristin Rehder was born and raised in Wilmington, North Carolina. For 38 years she has developed fundraising communications for educational institutions. In 2010 she embarked on a master's degree in liberal studies at Skidmore College, concentrating in the cultural history of photography. The Way to Wanakena is her graduate thesis project. Kristin and her partner, Sue Washburn, have a cabin on Eddy Road, overlooking the Oswegatchie.

"I first came here in the spring of 2002 not long after I met Sue. I had never been to the Adirondacks. As soon as we walked onto the porch, I remember thinking that the best parts of my childhood—the simple and real things I cherished—had just been returned to me in one place, a place called Wanakena."

"I grew up sailing and always loved being on the water. Sue told me she would teach me to kayak. Being proud, I turned down her offer to show me how to get into the boat, stepped in upright, and immediately went sprawling into the very cold river. Lesson learned."

"When I am kayaking or walking in the woods, I feel that I am just a small part of the much larger natural world, a world that has so much to teach me. One of the reasons I photograph what I see in nature is not to try to capture it but to release myself into it."

"Those of us who care about Wanakena need to continue to find ways to work together to preserve what we value here. I'm not a year-rounder, but I don't love this place any less when I'm not here. I want to be part of making sure that Wanakena's future is bright."

"The world is filled with beautiful places and I have seen many, from Mount Rainier to Machu Picchu, from Monhegan Island to the Galapagos, but, to me, nothing is more beautiful or more peaceful than Wanakena."
Comments

Fantastic photos and stories! Wonderful piece! Thanks for sharing this online!

Hillel Brandes
State College, PA

So many souls are beautifully captured! Inspiring work Kristin.

Beautiful pictures! It brought tears to my eyes to see the people of Wanakena and to hear their stories. I miss Wanakena so much and can't wait to get home! Thank you for capturing Wanakena's spirit!

Ella Donovan

This exhibit widened my understanding of what community can mean. I went into the exhibit thinking community meant the relationships between and among the residents, but came out of the exhibit feeling that community also included the relationship between the residents and nature.

It is clear from the comments that the wilderness and nature play key roles for every resident in their thoughts about the community - their love of the community and dedication to it include a love and dedication to the nature in which they live. I think the term nesting holons captures this - the idea that each resident and the collection of their families and houses is nested in a larger web of nature. And this larger context of nature gives a depthness and richness - dare I say a layer of mystic spirituality - to the texture of the Wanakena community.

Another reflection on this exhibit: I have never been to Wanakena, but seeing the photos and reading the stories made me feel connected to and interested in the community. I'm curious whether the residents of Wanakena have the same reaction.

I loved ALL the photos--and the carefully constructed biographical information for each, which doubled the impact.

Wanakena is unique, and your show nicely captures this very special community.

- Michael Marien, Star Lake & LaFayette NY

Our grandpa, The Rev. Harry Fred Smith, was the minister in Wanakena during some of the lumbering years. He bought some of the land when the lumber company moved out. Our uncle, Ernest Smith, was born on Second Street. My cousins, the Tates, and I have been coming up here all our lives. Our children and grandchildren love Wanakena as much as--or ALMOST as much as--we do. Connie (Flood) Brown

I am sad to see that my father, Richard Squire is not listed in this story. He has the only A-frame in Wanakena at the top of fifth street; lovingly named "the Indian" and has summered there since the 70's. His carved Indian stand guard at the top of the hill.

I too spent every summer on the river and in the woods and now I can offer that wonderful kind of life for my children. Wanakena is the safest, quietest escape there is!

It brought tears to my eyes, as I love Wanakena too! I hope to live there some day soon. Janet Yuckel

Your post reflects your soul!
I have really enjoyed reading and seeing all of these great people who have one way or another made Wanakena their homes...Thank you.

Pam Given Lobdell

This is so nice!! I used to think that Wanakena was just the Ranger School. Then, I met a lady who lived there, but I still thought of it as "the Ranger School". This is a great picture of a beautiful community. Carol Nye-Tupper Lake, NY

As a recent first-time visitor to Wanakena, conducting the Northern Lights Orchestra in the downtown park, I instantly fell in love with this town and its charming, genuine people. I described Wanakena as a 'diamond in the rough' - a beautiful, natural place set perfectly within the backdrop of nowhere, which is always the best place to find hidden jewels. Thank you so much for these wonderful photos, and thank you Wanakena for being such a comfortable and welcoming place!

Chris Hosmer, Northern Lights Orchestra, Canton

Great pictures of great people. A small village with a beautiful view of life.

Brian Dolan

What a fantastic tribute to the eclectic people of Wanakena! Thanks for sharing. It was a fantastic place to grow up!
Blake Siskavich
Hampton Falls, NH
(Wanakena Native)

I grew up in Star Lake, just a few miles away. From the footbridge to the Pinecone, to the black bears and the loons, that small area of the North Country is in my heart and in my blood. I can't wait to see the exhibit.

So nice to see all the comments and I can tell you that growing up in Wanakena was a blessing...I wish all my children could have had the same priviledge....My Mom was a mainstay in Wanakena...a great teacher both to the students she had in class and to her own children...Mom (Alice Hazelton) would have loved this site...Thanks for sharing. Laura (Hazelton) Ameeo

As a friend of Sue and Kristin's, I have been to Wanakena - but only once, I am sorry to say. I recall it as a place of great beauty and peace. I have enjoyed looking at the photos and reading the stories. I have tried to see the whole community by linking the stories together. (I wonder if my linkages are anywhere near reality!?) Kristin, you work with such sensitivity. Thank you.

Christine

What a wonderful gift to this Wanakena community -and anyone with an interest in the Adirondacks or concern for maintaining and building community on a small town scale. There is much here to appreciate and ponder ... you have accomplished something remarkable and profound ... touching in so many ways. I expect that your loving gift (of this project) will grow in importance over time, have endless appeal and benefit.
Thank you. Thank you for your energy, wisdom, vision and ability to help us feel so closely connected to so many others at once.
- Steve Moyer

This is a model community, all other communities take note.

Kristin, This is wonderful work! I feel like I know many of the people you have included in your thesis because I hear you and Sue talk about them (always nicely!) so often. Congratulations! I can’t wait to see the Tang exhibit. Love to you & Sue!
- McG

Absolutely outstanding. I loved seeing old friends and learning about all the interesting new people who’ve arrived and settled in in the last 10 or 12 years. Glad they are in the spirit and not trying to modernize and change that wonderful place. Ronnie Peterson, Ossining NY

As a 1980 grad of the Ranger School my appreciation for Wanakena is only strengthened by 'The Way to Wanakena' and it’s inhabitants, some of which I had the privilege to know during my year at school and the following summer working at the Bio Station. There is a reason I have returned every year since to the area. I really feel like I have to… it’s almost therapeutic.

Thank you so much for this.
William Harris
Kenmore, NY

Really fun to look at and read about all the Wonderful people of Wanakena.

Growing up in Wanakena is the best. Wish I was able to raise my children in such a wonderful community.

What a beautiful picture: I would not have know who you were if I had not seen the names. That tells you how long since I came to Wanakena. Sure would LOVE to see you all. This is a wonderful site, I will share it on my facebook page.
Glenda Sawyer
Winchester, Va.

What a wonderful exhibit! Thanks so much for sharing on this site, to be able to share it with our extended friends and family.
Patty Lincourt
Wanakena!