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A PHOTOGRAPHER'S SEARCH FOR JOY IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

By David Gonzalez, March 15, 2018



Meryl Meisler arrived in New York in 1975, when she was on the cusp of turning 24 and the city was on the brink of bankruptcy. Times Square had yet to be tamed, streets were dirty and all the federal government could do when asked for help was to tell the city — in the memorable formation of The New York Daily News — “Drop dead.”

Ms. Meisler loved it.

“I felt like I belonged,” she said. “I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do, even though I had a teaching degree. Maybe because the city itself was out of joint. I had just come out as a lesbian, but I felt like I belonged here. I felt safe.”

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She had been raised on Long Island, went to college in Wisconsin and was trying to figure out her next steps. In those uncertain times, she found the people and places she encountered fascinating, as she photographed on the street before returning to her Upper West Side sublet to process her film.

Like many young photographers, she found that taking pictures of strangers can be daunting. She relied on an icebreaker of the era, bumming cigarettes to start a conversation.

“It wasn’t about the cigarettes; it was about the people,” said Ms. Meisler, a prolific photographer who spent years as an art teacher in pre-hipster Bushwick. “It was a way of saying hello to people and being less shy.”

Carrying her camera everywhere, she took pictures of everything from boys playing gladiator using garbage can lids as shields; strippers in Times Square; and members of the Village People backstage. Some make you wonder, others make you smile.

As crazy as the city was back then, so, too, was her affection for it. And it hasn’t wavered.

“Most of the things I photographed I considered pretty upbeat,” she said. “I like to photograph things that give me joy, because there’s certainly enough heartache.”