

# HUMANS

OF NEW YORK • PARIS • ST. PETERSBURG • HONG KONG • AMSTERDAM • JUBA • SANTIAGO • KARACHI  
ACCRA • BUENOS AIRES • BERLIN • CALCUTTA • BOGOTÁ • LIMA • JAIPUR • RIO DE JANEIRO • JOHANNESBURG  
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ALEXANDRIA • BARILOCHE • ROME • CÓRDOBA • LAGOS • LONDON • MANILA • KAMPALA  
ERBIL • MELBOURNE • AUCKLAND • PASSU • TEHRAN • ANZALI • AKWAMUFIE • SAIGON  
MEXICO CITY • BAY OF ISLANDS • MOSCOW • MONTEVIDEO • AND MORE

**BRANDON STANTON**

**AUTHOR OF HUMANS OF NEW YORK**



brandon stanton

# HUMANS

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*To Savannah*

# INTRODUCTION

IT'S BEEN ALMOST EXACTLY ten years since the creation of *Humans of New York*. I'm still not sure what exactly to call it. "Photography project" seems a little reductive. "Blog" sounds a little too digital. After a decade of evolution, the work seems to strain against all the labels I've used in the past. Even the title itself seems outdated. Having collected stories from more than forty countries, *Humans of New York* can no longer be taken literally. My hope is that the name now signals a certain type of storytelling.

When I first set out on this journey in 2010, the concept was quite simple: I wanted to photograph ten thousand people on the streets of New York City. I had the added goal of plotting these photos on a map. It seemed like the mission of a madman, especially because I had no training as a photographer. But the impracticality of the goal served a purpose. It got me out on the street. Day after day. Not only learning to photograph, but also to approach strangers, make them feel comfortable, and engage them in conversation. Over time, these peripheral skills would become more central to *Humans of New York* than the photography itself.

As I collected thousands of portraits, I'd naturally have conversations with some of my subjects. I began including short quotes in the captions of the photographs. Some of the quotes were humorous. Others were thoughtful. Still others could be heartbreaking. But all of them provided a brief glimpse into the inner life of a random person on the street. For a long time these quotes remained quite superficial. I was still uncomfortable in the presence of a stranger: afraid of invading their space, not wanting to offend, unsure of boundaries. I spent very little time with each person. I'd ask a few simple questions, then I would write down the first thing that came out of their mouth.

But as time went on, the conversations grew longer and longer. My questions became less casual. More searching and intimate. I grew bolder in the realization that most people enjoyed the process. They welcomed the opportunity to share about their lives, even with a stranger. Many were honored that someone cared enough to listen. Often I'd spend hours with someone I'd just met, huddled on the edge of a busy sidewalk, examining the events of their lives, trying to understand where they came from. Sometimes people shared secrets about their lives that they'd never told another person. And *Humans of New York* became known for the candor and intimacy of its stories.

As millions of people began to follow *Humans of New York* on social media, it also became clear that the appeal of the work had little to do with the city. It wasn't New York that was commanding so much attention. It was the people. It was the power of the individual story. Building on this realization, I took the process that I'd developed on the streets of New York and began to travel overseas. I photographed in many different countries. With the help of talented interpreters, I interviewed hundreds of people around the world. The conversations felt refreshingly familiar. The work felt the same. And the audience came along on the journey, which allowed me to keep traveling. This book is the result of these travels.

But before we begin, a quick note on what this book is not:

With a title like *Humans*, it might seem that this book aims to cover the entirety of human experience. And I certainly felt that pressure. I spent a long time away from home. I pushed the book deadline back a full two years so that I could cover as much of the world as possible. But no matter how exhaustive my efforts, *Humans* was never going to be an anthropological study. It was never going to be the perfect balance of every ethnicity, every religion, every voice. It just wasn't possible. In the end, this book is what it was always destined to be: the collected conversations of a single photographer—who traveled to as many places as he could, and met as many people as he could.

Thanks to everyone who's been along for the ride. I get caught up in the work and I don't say it nearly enough: you are the best group of people on the internet. You've created this magic little corner of the Web where

people feel safe sharing their stories—without being ridiculed, or bullied, or judged. These stories are only honestly shared because they have a long history of being warmly received. Thank you for the encouragement you’ve given to everyone I’ve interviewed. And the encouragement you’ve given me.

I hope you enjoy reading this book as much as I enjoyed making it. ◆



“I spent my childhood working, so I never had the chance to get an education. I was always envious of the boys who got to wear uniforms. This is her first month of school. She comes home and tells me exactly what happened, every day. I love it. If I’m not home for a few days, she’ll save up all her stories, then tell them to me all at once.”

LAHORE, PAKISTAN



“I graduated more than one thousand kids from elementary school. I’d still be teaching but my eyes went bad. It’s such an important time in a child’s life. It’s when they learn speech, grammar, and how to pay attention. It’s when the tree gets its roots. If you’re taught wrong in elementary school, you’ll be trying to catch that train for the rest of your life.”

ST. PETERSBURG, RUSSIA





“I’d like them to be ministers or businesspeople. But this one is supposed to start school this year, and I don’t have the money to send him.”

KASANGULU, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO



“When I was eighteen, a large group of students visited Ghana from the UK for a youth development program. It was an expensive program. It cost thousands of pounds. But I got to join for free because they needed some Ghanaians for a smattering of cultural diversity. The program was a mixture of community service and adventure. We actually came canoeing on this very lake. The whole time I was thinking about how much money was being made from our natural resources. And how much of that money was leaving Ghana. I became determined to make Ghana money out of the Ghana environment. So after graduating college, I set out to build a world-class adventure company. It’s been over five years now. We have twelve full-time employees and twenty-five adventure locations. Best of all, I think we’re creating an adventure culture in the country. Our clients were seventy percent foreign when we started. Now they’re eighty percent Ghanaian. Behind me is Survival Island. It’s my latest project and biggest risk yet. I constructed a full ropes course, and one day I hope to build the world’s longest zip line. That would really put Ghana on the adventure map.”

ACCRA, GHANA





“I think sixty is a pretty good age for life to terminate. It would certainly clear out some room for younger generations. Everything deteriorates after sixty, anyway. After that we’re just old plants being kept alive with extra fertilizer. The pains get worse every day. It’s not natural. Think of the millions of people sitting in retirement homes right now. Nothing to do. No future to look forward to. It’s no way to live. Everyone needs a pill. That would be great. Enjoy your life as long as you want, but the moment the pain becomes too much, it’s in your hands to stop it.”

AMSTERDAM, THE NETHERLANDS



“I told my daughter to wash the dishes, and she called me an alcoholic. It really hurt. I’ve known I was an alcoholic since I was a teenager, but that was the first time that someone else had called me one.”

NEW YORK, UNITED STATES



“I thought it would always be in balance. That I’d always feel compensated. That parenting would always be exhausting, and always be fantastic. But sometimes it’s just one or the other. There are moments when it’s nothing but anger, frustration, and powerlessness. Maybe we’re late for an appointment. Or I need to get to work. And she doesn’t want to leave the house. She’ll fall on the floor, throw a fit, and not move. You’ll try to reason with her but she won’t even hear you. And at moments like this you feel so tired. All of the patience, all of the love, cannot be found. You wonder: ‘Why did I even start this?’ But then in the same day, the same hour, it all turns around. She’ll come back from an errand with my wife, and she’ll jump out of the car, run up to me, and squeeze me harder than you can possibly imagine. And I can’t imagine ever being angry. All I can think is: ‘What on earth did I do to deserve this little scoundrel?’”

AMSTERDAM, THE NETHERLANDS





“I’ve seen a lot of death.”

TONGPING INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS SITE, JUBA, SOUTH SUDAN



“There’s nothing hard about being four.”

NEW YORK, UNITED STATES



“I was allowed to borrow my granddaughter this morning so we are walking through the park. It’s our personal pastime. She likes to look at the dogs and birds. Today we saw some blackbirds which was quite exciting.”

SANTIAGO, CHILE



“Grandma was supposed to babysit today, but she wasn’t feeling well. So I got the nudge at six a.m.”

NEW YORK, UNITED STATES





“He’s my only grandchild. Every time he does anything, I enjoy it. The other day he pulled down the TV set. I didn’t even mind.”

KARACHI, PAKISTAN



“We’re eating cookies before lunch because Grandpa doesn’t have any rules.”

PARIS, FRANCE





“I’d always leave the house dressed like a man, but then I’d change my clothes. My mother told me the devil was in me. My father said that I was useless. They even took me to the doctor to find out what was going on. But my grandfather always supported me. He was more open-minded than my parents. I think it’s because he worked at a twenty-four-hour restaurant and met all the people who came out at night. Even when I was a child, he’d see the clothes I wore, and he’d tell me: ‘If you were a girl, you’d be very beautiful.’ When I finally told him everything I was feeling, he said: ‘You’re a great person, and I’ll never be afraid of what’s going on with you.’”

BUENOS AIRES, ARGENTINA



“When my grandmother died, there was a feeling that I’m all alone in this world. Her favorite saying was: ‘I’m always here for you, whenever you need me.’ Without asking questions. Without judging. My parents were different. They wanted things from me. They wanted me to be a good person, and graduate, and get a job, and do well. But I kept failing. I questioned everything. I was bad at school. I didn’t follow the rules. I had purple hair. And a nose ring. And to make things worse—I had this perfect, beautiful little sister who did everything right. But every time I messed up, I could go to Oma. And she’d tell me: ‘Don’t worry so much. These things aren’t important.’ And ‘I love you, darling.’ And ‘You’re not a bad person.’ And ‘You’ll find a way to be happy.’ It could be so hard growing up. It felt like the world wanted so much from me. But my grandmother was different. She just loved me.”

BERLIN, GERMANY



“I grew up in a very strict household. I had to dress in a modest way. I couldn’t drink. Couldn’t stay out late. And my family certainly wouldn’t want me marrying a non-Muslim. Especially a white guy. It’s not even possible to have an Islamic wedding with a non-Muslim. But he’s made it clear that he’s not willing to convert. And I understand his position. We were just talking about our future yesterday. I know the situation bothers him. He wants me to commit. He wants me to be clear, and say that none of this matters, and that I’m willing to lose everything to be together. But it’s not that easy. My uncles would turn away from me. My aunts would turn away from me. I’ve seen it happen to other members of my extended family. I’d like to think that my mom would never leave my side—but she’s a people pleaser, so I can’t be sure. My father divorced her. And she’s been carrying that shame all her life. So I’m not sure if she can handle any more. Right now I feel like I’m living two lives. I went home for Eid and it felt like I was living a lie. I’m not sure what to do. I know he thinks I’m doubting our relationship. But it’s not like that at all. I wouldn’t have invested this much time if I didn’t want to be together. And I’m willing to do it. I’m willing to tell the whole world, and my family, and have them never speak to me again. But in the back of my mind, I can’t help asking myself: ‘Why won’t he convert? Just for a minute. He doesn’t have to



follow. But that way I can tell everyone that we're Muslims. Why am I the one that has to make the sacrifice?"

AMSTERDAM, THE NETHERLANDS



“We have to keep our relationship secret. Our parents would not approve and we're not courageous enough to tell them yet. So we meet in secret three or four times per month. Since the beginning of our relationship, we've shared a diary. We take turns keeping it. Whoever has it will write down our memories. They'll also write down what they want from the other person, and how they feel misunderstood. Then every time we meet—we hand it off.”

CALCUTTA, INDIA