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This versatile multimedia journalist and 'story magnet' talks about evolving with the times, the technology, and of working as a woman photographer in a male-dominated industry.



Article by Jenn Gidman
Images by Francine Grinnell

If you ask Francine Grinnell to describe her role behind the camera, "regional multimedia journalist" wouldn't be off-base. But there's another descriptor she feels fits her even better. "I'm a storyteller," she says. "Everybody wants to be heard, and to be represented faithfully. My toolbox as a multimedia journalist has evolved to use words, stills, video and audio to tell those stories."

Francine's multi-decade journey in the industry has included full-time staff positions at upstate New York newspapers such as the Saratogian, Troy Record, Community News, Amsterdam Reporter and Saratoga Today, as well as a long freelance career creating content for The Jewish World, the Daily Gazette, and MediaNews Group, where she worked for six different publications. "As a freelancer, I wrote the articles, took the stills, made the videos, and pitched my own stories," she says, noting on her website that she's been called a "story magnet." Take a peek at her work and you'll glimpse a diverse portfolio that includes everything from street photography and portraits to climate change protests, active-shooter drills with police, and local government meetings. "I've always been proud to carry a press pass. It gave me access into people's lives and their stories," she says.



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Tamron chatted with Francine about her life's work, the challenges she's faced as a non-traditional student and as a woman in a male-dominated field, and how she's adapted over the decades to the imaging arena's ever-changing technology. Our conversation has been lightly edited for clarity.

When did you become drawn to photography initially, and what inspired you to become a journalist and press photographer?

As a young child, my mother had a Brownie camera, and later on a Polaroid. You mailed your roll of film in and waited for the prints to come back. Probably the earliest defining moment for me was John F. Kennedy's assassination, and the decade of cultural trauma that followed. I was in the second grade when JFK was shot, and my mother kept a copy of the New York Times from the day he was killed, showing that photo of a stunned Jackie Kennedy standing in a blood-stained Chanel suit next to Lyndon Johnson as he was sworn in as president.

That was followed over the next several years by a slide show of powerful news photos: the assassinations of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., and Bobby Kennedy. The Vietnam war was brought before the American public in heart-stopping, iconic images such as the "Napalm Girl" photo, and the departure of Nixon flashing the peace symbol after Watergate.

Shortly thereafter, you had all of the rockers dying—Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison—within a year or two of each other. It was the power of these news images, telling these stories without words, that made such a huge impression on me.

What do you try to impart in your images?

I go for a faithfulness to the person in my images. My strength is sitting across the table, one on one, and drawing out those qualities that make the subject and interviewee a unique individual. I see this profession as a calling, because there's a sacredness in being entrusted with someone's story like that. I feel protective of my subjects and always care enough to get the details right. They usually respond with "You got me."



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Talk about the changes in photography and technology you've witnessed over the years, and how you've stayed updated.

I've had seven years of college at four different schools to keep up on everything. Skidmore College, where I studied fine art; Parsons School of Design, where I learned commercial art; Sage College in Albany, where I obtained a degree in illustration, with a concentration in photography and writing for the mass media; and SUNY Adirondack, where I earned a degree in radio and television broadcasting. Each time was a move to stay current so that if a new employer said, "Can you do this?" "Do you have the skills?" I could say yes. I would always have to be brutally honest with myself and ask myself what my proficiency levels were and what I really needed to work on.

I've had to stay ahead of the curve. First there was the switch from film to digital, from the picture-taking itself to the editing process afterward. Then, when I was a freelancer for those six newspapers under MediaNews Group between 2003 and 2014, they asked if I shot video. I said of course—I never said no to anything—and so I went to Best Buy and bought a Flip video camera and started using it. One of my editors at the Saratogian once said to me, "What are you, a one-man band?"

Then social media came into the mix, where everyone with a cell phone suddenly called themselves a photographer. There was a decline in quality around this time, in both the images and the craft of journalism, as what were called "citizen journalists" got thrown into the mix. I feel the need for cost cutting and a demand for 24/7 content caused the craft to suffer. This in turn lowered the bar for what passed as acceptable in a "whatever" culture.

Most recently, technology shifts have drawn me into the world of mirrorless cameras, and lenses like the [Tamron 70-300mm](#). I've only had this new system a short time, and I'm just starting to shoot with it. I love that I'm not being bogged down by a crippling load of heavy equipment. My camera and lens are compact and lightweight, allowing easier access when I'm shooting. I can move in quickly, get the shot even from a distance, and get back to write the article and process the jogs.

What kind of challenges did you face as a woman in this industry?

When I graduated from SUNY Adirondack with my broadcasting degree, I was the only woman who walked across the gym floor in the hockey arena at graduation, one of five out of a dozen other classmates to pick up my diploma. There initially had been two other women in the program, but they'd quit.

In terms of the working world, there's always been this little voice in my head that says, "I can do that." It helped that, as a freelancer, I was usually able to work from home, so I wasn't as immersed in the day-to-day politics as the full-timers were. And because I've been in the business for so long, I've seen how much things have changed for women over the years. It's definitely better now than it was in the early days.



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But that's not to say I didn't experience challenges. First of all, there was the equipment and getting access at news conferences. I'd go to the pressers, and there would be all of these big, tall men hauling around gear that wasn't designed for a 100-pound person like myself. No one carries your equipment. I'd lug it around and somehow worm my way through the folks who were all jockeying for position for the same shot I was. An editor at the Troy Record who once gave me a reference said, "Oh, Francine Grinnell—she's a very aggressive reporter." Then she added, "But in a good way." In the rare photos taken of me, my hands and arms seem to me inordinately muscular for someone my size, because of working out to handle all the equipment I had to carry around.

I had other challenging experiences. During a time when some of the local medical centers were being bought up by corporate conglomerates, I was covering a well-known hospital in the area, and the hospital's PR person was following me around, hanging over my shoulder and telling me what pictures to take and what pictures not to take. Then, when we sat down at a table to interview some people, he started to direct the interview, and I looked at him and said, "I'll direct the interview." When I got back to the newsroom a couple of days later, I found out that he had requested the newspaper send a male reporter the next time. My editor backed me up and told me it was my call on what to do. I had reached a point where I knew I didn't have to tolerate misogynists and learned the power of how to go in to cover a story one more time and to turn the whole attitude around with individuals like that.

Have there been any women photographers who've inspired you of late?

When my position was cut last April due to budgetary issues brought about by COVID-19, I knew I'd have to eventually explain any gap when I got back into the work world again. An important part of an active job search is to attend workshops and other industry-related events to stay abreast of what's going on, and to stay informed on the changes in the industry. When I signed on for some of Tamron's webinars, I saw women from the tech team, including Jillian Bell and Janet Vuong, leading the webinars, and going into great technical detail about how to use the latest gear. They appeared to be really enjoying themselves, and they were able to communicate the craft in a way that spoke to me. They were people like me doing the job and getting paid for it.



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What was it like going back to school later in life?

It was interesting as a returning student this last time having classmates who showed up to class in pajamas, slippers, and superhero outfits while gaming on their cell phones. Plus, at SUNY Adirondack, I had to take four math classes to graduate with a broadcasting degree. I hadn't taken math classes in decades. I failed an algebra class, then retook it and managed to pass, but when it came to the final math class—trigonometry—I advocated for myself and said to the math teachers, "You have to teach this in a language I can relate to."

So, they did. They developed a trigonometry course for visual learners in the final semester where I could photograph triangles that I found in everyday situations and then apply the math concepts I'd learned to my visuals. So, there I was in the supermarket photographing cheese wheels, and in parking lots taking pictures of the VW logo on cars. It turned out that learning math made me a better photographer, because afterward I finally understood the use of shutter speed and focal point more than I ever had. It was very empowering.



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Ultimately, what's the appeal for you in being a photographer and journalist?

I'll be honest when I say that I don't know that this lifestyle is for everyone. You really have to love what you do, because there can be a lot of rough times financially, and the days can be long. Some people run away from the fire, and some run toward it. I've run toward the fire, and then walked through it, and I've had to do so with grace and maturity to face a lot of uncertainty. As a female photographer, I've had to hold my head up and stand up for myself and my skills.



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But that's not to say I would discourage anyone from pursuing this as a career. If you're the type who feels that adrenaline of pursuing a story, and of presenting your subject's story to your audience, it's all worth it. I'm a person of faith, and I have a lot of gratitude for some of the everyday miracles that have landed at my feet. And this month, as I began to use my new Tamron 70-300mm lens, it felt like Christmas. I look forward to this next open door: my life as a storyteller continues.



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