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Saturday in the Park

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By Jane Gottlieb

On a beach in Israel, Arabs and Jews find a place away from their struggles. In a park in southern California, Latino teens find a place to shine. In the quiet places on both continents, photographer Jenni Goldman finds refuge from conflict.

"I definitely do not want to photograph war or pain—which is one reason I stopped being a newspaper photographer," says Goldman, 34, a photojournalist and photojournalism lecturer based in Long Beach, California. "I'd go and photograph car accidents and fires, and my hands would shake. I was too sensitive to pain. I intentionally choose projects that are joyful."

Her stories of serenity—so-called "visual diaries" —along the Dead Sea and the Mediterranean Sea have been exhibited and published extensively from Jerusalem to Los Angeles. Through the 1990s, Goldman, in fact, created a number of bodies of work in Israel, wishing each time to temper pictures of violence splashed across the global press. With "The Dead Sea Peace" we see the sea's almost magical ability to make people relax during the delicate period when a peace agreement was worked out between Israel and Jordan. "Peace by Piece" is Goldman's dispatch from the disputed Golan Heights right after Israel withdrew from Lebanon. "Remnants of a Dream" celebrated life on the kibbutz as Israel turned 50.

But it was not until she was back in California considering her next Israel story that she began seeing the same utopian ideal played out here. It happened on a Saturday morning while she was at nearby Scherer Park practicing with her new digital camera. One after another, groups of Hispanic teenagers pulled up in stretch limousines, wearing ball gowns and tuxedos and assembling for formal pictures.

The occasion was La Quinceañera, the celebration of a girl's 15th birthday. Dating back centuries, La Quinceañera once signaled that a girl was eligible to marry—today it means that she may start dating. But with their handmade headdresses and hand-picked courts of honor, the girls glide through a church ceremony and celebration like brides. The boys, pouring it on in suspenders, white oversized suits and fancy hats, round out a picture of ageless celebrants.

"La Quinceañera is a really significant part of Latino culture that deserves to be documented. But when I began researching it the only books I found were children's books," says Goldman, who soon made Saturday morning visits a habit. "I am photographing something very important and feel like I have something to say about it."

Largely, the young adults and their families are happy to include Goldman in their photo sessions. In contrast to her Israel work, largely candid photographs, her quinceañera subjects are asked to pose. She does not tell them what to do, though, moving the work from the realm of portraiture to journalism. And to her surprise, the teenagers largely eschew stiff smiling mug shots for more theatrical expressions befitting the occasion. Shot always in color, the photographs distinguish the occasion as distinctly Latin. The young adults, only too aware that they are wearing costumes, appear as stars in their own drama. Goldman hopes to find an agent to exhibit the work.



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"I am grateful that my camera creates an intersection of lives that I might not otherwise have the courage to explore," she wrote of her work on both sides of the ocean. "They both document the theater of humanity, but also have larger implications: 'Quinceañera Park' represents a celebration of Latino culture and 'The Dead Sea Peace' represents peaceful possibilities between Arabs and Jews."

Goldman has no doubt that "Quinceañera Park" will lead her to look more closely at Hispanic America, as she has pursued the story of Israel. For now, she is happy to focus on "this Saturday moment in their lives."

Communicating moments of happiness is a lifelong habit. In fact, at 22 and fresh from earning her degree in visual arts, Goldman's aversion to blood and guts got her fired from her first newspaper job.

"The editor told me I should consider another line of work," she recalls. "The day he fired me, I had a double trunk picture in a regional magazine that took second place in the Western region for news."

Though devastated, she had earned enough outside recognition to stay motivated. Goldman used the change of plans as a springboard. She attended the Eddie Adams Workshop, then earned a spot as an artist-in-residence in Arad, Israel. For a year and a half she photographed people at the Dead Sea. The photos, as with her subsequent work in Israel, reflect the perspective of a Jewish American while also neutralizing the differences between Arabs and Jews, Israelis and Palestinians.

Today, after working for two years in the photo department at Vanity Fair, Goldman teaches photojournalism at the California State Polytechnic University and heads to Scherer Park on Saturdays, where she never expected to find her next project.

"I wasn't looking," she says. "It's quite a luxury to work just 20 minutes from home."

More of Goldman's images can be seen at www.jennigoldman.com.

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