

## Each of Us Has a Story to Tell

How do we give voice to the concept of a broader definition of diversity and give our campus communities an opportunity to use their voices to inspire others as to the impact each of our lives can make in this world? Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) has created a unique way of doing just this.

RISDiversity: Community Narratives was launched in 2011 and features a series of portraits (by photographer, author and educator Adam Mastoon) of RISD faculty, staff and students willing to share their voices and vision with the campus community. The photographed individuals

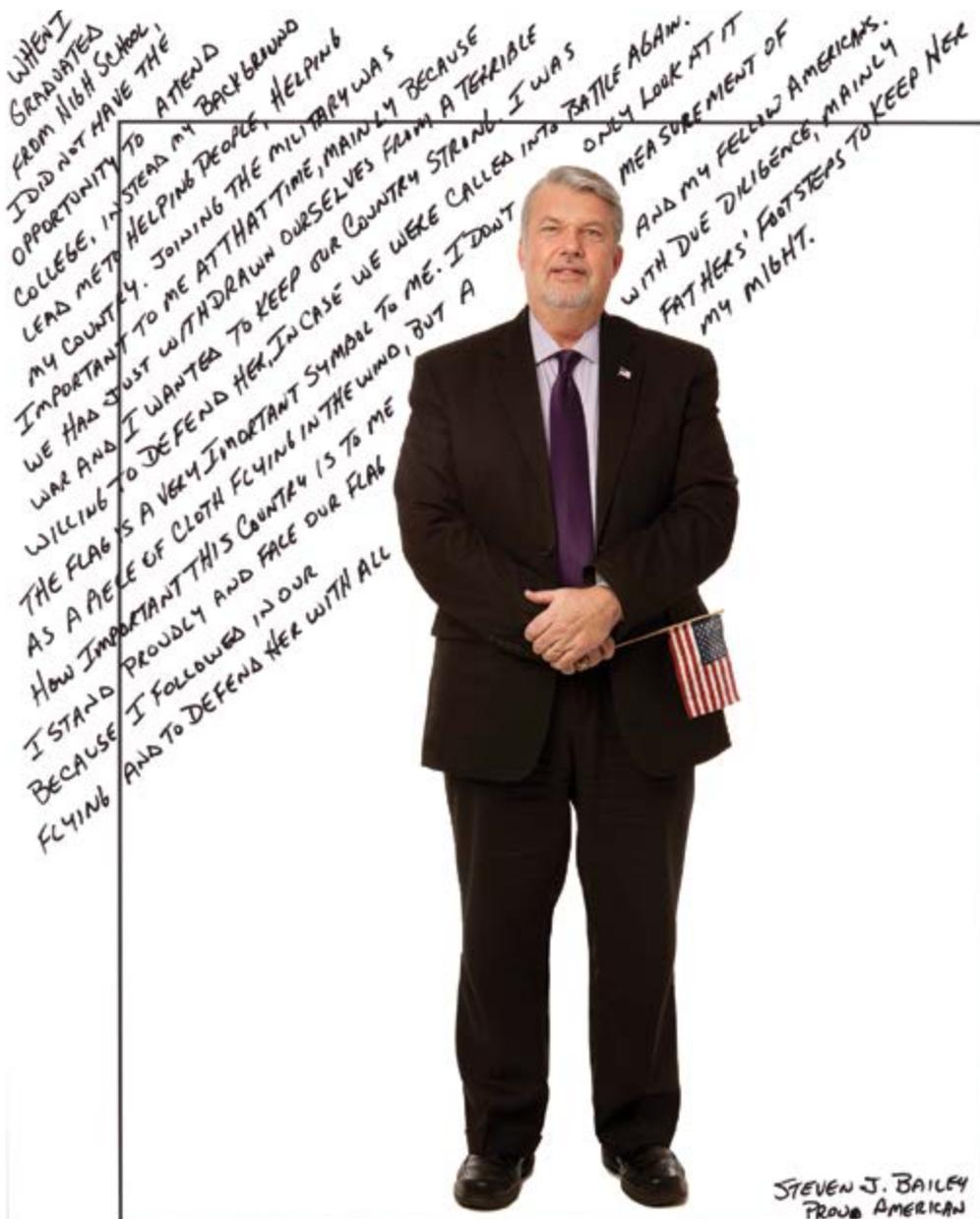
share their stories through their own powerful text and artwork which accompany the portraits. The collection of 45 portraits provides an inspiring and insightful look into the unique and authentic lives, journeys and stories of some of the individuals that make up the RISD community. Each portrait is installed in a prominent location around campus — places where students, faculty and staff would be likely to see them as part of their everyday routine.

"The idea behind the Community Narratives project is to show that diversity isn't something that exists outside

our daily lives," says Candace Baer, vice president for human resources at RISD. "Instead, it's something that exists all around us every day." The project has been quite successful both on and off campus as waiting lists are forming for those interested in participating, including RISD alumni, in next year's project.

"Through images and text, the Community Narratives project is the perfect opportunity to take who we currently are and celebrate the vitality of it," says Tony Johnson, director of intercultural student engagement at RISD. "It highlights that everybody has a place at the table when it comes to diversity."

Adds Baer, "It allows us to get to know one another on a deeper level and enables us to recognize that we are each unique in our own way. And it's that individual uniqueness that melds together to form who we are as a campus community, and that's what makes RISD such a special place."



## “I Want Everyone to Know I’m a Proud American”

As a veteran, one thing that irks Steven Bailey, assistant registrar at RISD, is when he sees a building with an empty flagpole out front. “Growing up, I was always told that I needed to salute the American flag, but I never fully understood why,” he says. “After I joined the Navy, I came to truly understand the significance of our flag. We are all blessed to be living in this country, and the flag means an awful lot to me. A flagpole with no flag on it, or a flag that is tattered and torn, is an affront to me and to all who have served this country.”

When he learned of the Community Narratives project, Bailey felt compelled to share his story. “I wanted to show the school and others how much I love my country. If need be, I would join the military again in a heartbeat.”

His participation in the project has served to spark dialogue with members of the campus community with whom he may not have interacted otherwise.

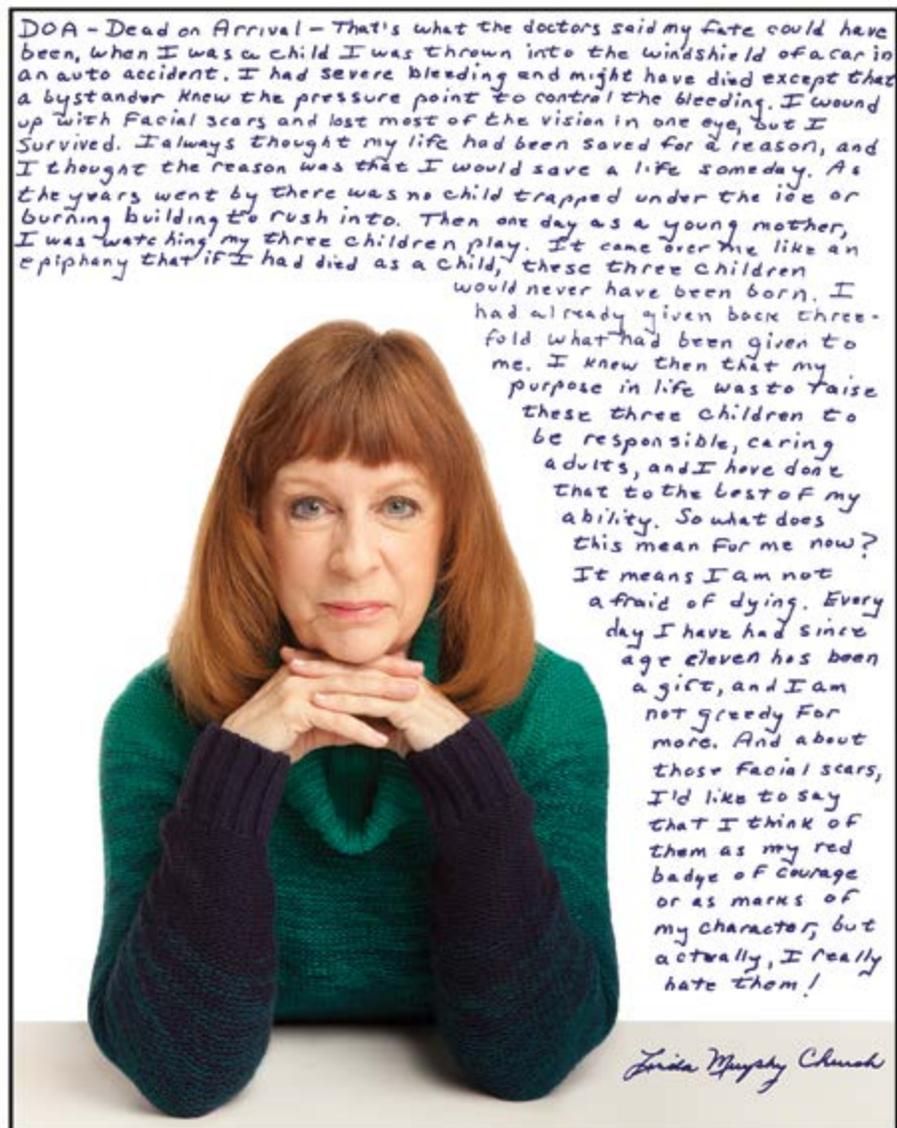
“I’ve had a couple of people approach me and say, ‘Hey, I didn’t know you were in the Navy. I was in the Navy, too!’ or ‘I, too, am bothered by a flagpole with no flag ... I’m glad I’m not alone in that sentiment,’” he says. “I think all too often we go to work, keep our heads down, do our jobs, and don’t really make an effort to get to know the people with whom we share eight hours of our day. The Community Narratives project has enabled us to open up more with one another within the RISD community.”

## “I Feel Like I Know My Colleagues Now”

Linda Murphy Church, executive director of planning, assessment and quality at RISD, wasn’t sure she fit the bill when she was asked to participate in the Community Narratives

project. “I thought to myself, ‘short, white woman — not much diversity here.’ But our vice president for HR told me it wasn’t just about race or ethnicity or sexual identity or disability, but about sharing our stories to show the richness of our community,” she says. “It was then that I realized I did have a story to tell — my story of survival, of finding my purpose in life and of living each day to the fullest.

“But because I have always been sensitive about my facial scars, I was somewhat reluctant and intimidated by the notion of having my picture blown up into a poster. I envisioned being photographed from a distance, but after reading my story, the photographer wanted to take a close-up shot, and I was completely comfortable with the result.”



# inclusion cultivates excellence

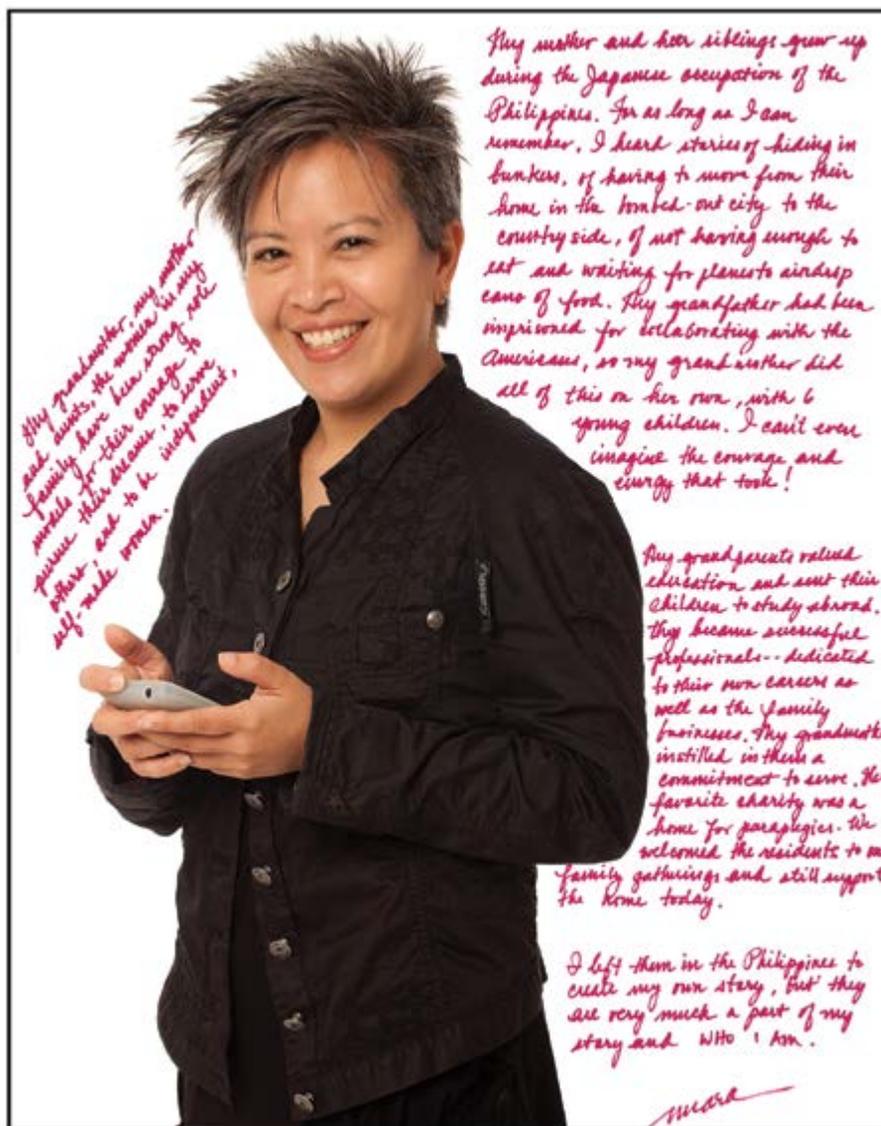
Church echoes Bailey's sentiment that we should be more deliberate in our efforts to get to know those around us. "We often get so tied to our work with our noses to the grindstone that we don't take the time to learn about the things that make us us," she says.

"I have working relationships with a few of the students, faculty and staff that have participated in this project, but the majority I do not know. Even the ones I do know, I didn't know their personal stories. These narratives have given me a new level of understanding, sensitivity and appreciation for all of my colleagues across all ranks and constituencies. Richness of experiences, richness of community — that's what it's all about."

## "I Now Have a Broader Definition of Diversity"

Mara Hermano, RISD's executive director of strategic planning and academic initiatives, was relatively new to the institution when she was asked to participate in the Community Narratives project. "I felt that this was a wonderful opportunity not only for me to get to know the people of RISD, but also for them to get to know me — as an individual rather than just as the person defined by my role and responsibilities in the president's office," she says.

"Through the project and through the work I did as a member of the Presidential Diversity Task Force, I learned that I often see but a few aspects of what the most expansive idea of diversity can encompass. Reading all of the narratives exposed me to the multiple dimensions of



diversity, many of which I had never before considered. The combination of individual stories with the honesty of the photography, the personalization of each work through writing and artwork, the exhibition of the photographs around the campus — these are things that help the community grasp the complexity of the individuals, their stories and their contributions to the institution." 



To see all of the Community Narratives project portraits and stories, visit <http://diversity.risd.edu>.