

THE BIGGER PICTURE

“The people you’re about to read about haven’t solved a medical mystery. They haven’t discovered a new planet or paid for a hundred heart operations in India. They’ve just survived. Despite all odds and beyond all common sense or knowledge. Their resilience is inspiring. Their resolve, breathtaking. Let me take you to the front lines of some of our planet’s most challenging places. There are some heroes there I’d love you to meet.”

HELEN MANSON

Helen Manson travels around the world photographing people who have suffered circumstances so inconceivable to us, that to look at her work is to be confronted by a stark reality from which we’re mostly sheltered. Her visually breathtaking and emotionally arresting images are of subjects for whom survival is the only objective, and yet, the Kiwi humanitarian photographer captures something about them that, despite their harrowing stories, is warm, open and deeply universal. Something that opens a channel of connection between the subject in Uganda or Iraq or Ghana, and the viewer on the other side of the world, and something that has, rightly, garnered Manson a number of awards.

For her, the act of photographing someone is about telling their story in a way that is dignified, real and courageous, which is why her work has lent itself naturally to a number of causes, seeing Manson documenting famine, refugee settlements, post war environments, micro-enterprise, child sponsorship programmes, trauma counselling and disaster zones.

After working in over 35 countries, Manson has settled in Uganda and continues to undertake humanitarian work and expand her portfolio. Recently, the photographer decided to give people a glimpse behind the lens by embarking on a photographic and speaking tour of New Zealand (which she did in May). Here, she discloses the stories behind some of her exquisite photographs, introducing us to incredible people whose tales need to be told.

Annet, and her triplets, Patience, Samuel and Grace sit outside their home in Uganda.

Annet
32 years old

“I never went to school. My mother died when I was 12 years old and I’d spent my life taking care of her. When I was 17 I eloped. I gave birth to my firstborn a few years later. But the man did not take care of me. Sometimes we would fight and then he’d leave for a month. Soon after I realised I was expecting my second baby, I didn’t have any money for a scan. I gave birth to Samuel in the house alone. But my tummy didn’t look right. It looked like I hadn’t even given birth to a baby. My brother-in-law called a boda (motorbike) to take me to the hospital but the midwife told me I was having twins and to go to a different hospital. When I arrived, the doctor called my husband and said he needed to take me to theatre to operate as I was having not just twins, but triplets. In our culture, twins are a blessing but triplets are a curse so my husband turned his phone off. The doctor signed the paperwork for me to have a C-section as it was a life and death situation. My husband refused to pay the hospital bill so the doctor ended up calling the press. When my story went public, Tearfund’s partner Compassion, came to help. They paid my hospital bill and tried at first to reconcile the relationship between my husband’s family and me. Sadly that was not successful. Today we are living in a home Compassion constructed for us on my father’s land. I am not worried about rent and being chased away if we cannot pay. These children are a blessing! I hope they grow up and have an education.”



Ebenezer, is photographed on Lake Volta, in Ghana — home to thousands of child labourers of which he used to be one.



Ebenezer

19 years old

"When I was just a few months old, my father was killed by a witch doctor because he owed them money but would not pay it. My mother died when I was two years old. For many years, I was sick and so, one day the village gave me a tribal marking on my cheek and I became healthy. My grandmother took me under her wing but she found it difficult to feed me and my other cousins who were also living with her. I felt hungry often. I would think about how I was an orphan and a burden on my grandmother. I did not want to be poor, I wanted to have an education and live a better life. One day a man came to the village and said he had work for young boys so I went with him. I was eight years old. Those first few days, I was so scared. I would dream at night about going back to my grandma. We used to wake up at 4am each day and then come back by midday for something small to eat. Then we would work again until night fall. We would cut up fish, bait them, put them in the water, collect the nets, bail water out of the boats, untie knots and dive deep. Sometimes the man who owned the boat would beat the other boys with paddles or bamboo on their backs. Even if I wanted to leave, I could not – I had no money for transport. One day our boat capsized in a thunderstorm and the man who took me to the lake could not operate his business anymore. When my grandma came to pick me up, she began to cry as she realised I had been doing child labour. I was paid NZD \$75 for four years work. When we got home, she approached Tearfund's partner Compassion, and they accepted me into a sponsorship program where I was given school fees, clothes, medical care and surplus food. Because of this program, I can talk, I have self-confidence. Today I'm studying to become an automotive engineer.

Grace

18 years old

"When I was born, my relatives thought I was a curse. They tried to convince my mother to stop breastfeeding me so that I would die of hunger. As I grew up, I gained consciousness and began to discern that I was different from other children. In fact, one time, I asked my mum, "Did you chop off my legs, why am I different from other children?" Kids would ridicule me and make fun of me because I could not play like they played or be involved in the games they were. I was a bitter person back then. I'd even throw stones at people. Shortly after my father was killed my Mum felt like she should move to Uganda to keep me safe. Eventually, she arranged for me to stay with a kind lady called Betty. I lived with her for seven years and she introduced me to Tearfund's partner, Compassion. I was sponsored and through that program, I was liberated from wrath and anger and given a heart full of love. The program also gave me school books, hygiene items, blankets, a mattress and school tuition. Compassion encouraged me to build my self-esteem, not live in self-pity and use the wheelchair they bought me to move around. I believe people think that those of us with disabilities are useless and cannot do much on the earth. To them we're not useful or productive. But I've never thought like that. Whatever normal people do with limbs, I can do too. For instance, I cook, I am able to mop our house, I'm able to wash and so I'm not limited. I have a goal of being a journalist one day and doing radio presentation. I believe I can do anything."

Grace, hangs out washing outside her home in Uganda.





Shamme*, is photographed inside her home within a refugee camp in Northern Iraq after escaping with her three daughters from being married to an ISIS man.

Shamme*

27 years old

"My name is Shamme*. I am 27 and I have three daughters aged six, eight and 11. I remember the day ISIS came to Sinjar. I saw many people die that day. They separated my daughters and me from my husband. They took us to Syria and told us we have no God and no humanity. An ISIS man came and took me by the hair and forced me to marry him. If I refused to sleep with him he would threaten to rape my daughters instead. Each night he would come home with bloody clothes from fighting and I would have to handwash them. Then one day he told me he was going to be blowing himself up and so, was selling me to another man. This next man was so bad to us. He would tie our hands behind our backs and only allow us out for prayer time. Once we tried to escape and he found out and gave us electric shocks to punish us. My children and I saw many unspeakable things. I struggled to sleep and felt like I was going crazy. One day we managed to escape through a smuggler. We walked for three days to get to safety. When we arrived in the refugee camp, I was so happy but realised most of my relatives had been killed or were still in captivity. When I went to Tutapona's trauma rehabilitation programme it made me feel like I could have hope and a future. Like many of my friends, I was also thinking about killing myself — but that would not solve the problem and that would not be good for my kids. I believe that one day our people will come back from captivity and Sinjar will be back as it was before."

*Name changed for security reasons



Edna, runs through a field behind her home in a Ugandan refugee settlement, pretending to be a pilot.

Edna

10 years old

"I was eight years old and at school in South Sudan when the soldiers began to shoot bullets. People were running. I remember seeing many people had died. There was lots of blood. People were floating in the river. I kept asking myself, why do people do things like this? My older sister, brother and I ran home to try and find our parents and three younger siblings. They were not there. We had to run. After three days we reached Uganda and were registered as refugees. My legs were swollen. My parents weren't there. We were all alone, we didn't know anyone. There was no one that could build for us a house. Our parents loved us so much and had taught us how important school was. Soon after, we sold our food rations to pay for school fees. One day, we introduced ourselves to World Vision. They registered us and gave us food. By this time, I had gone four days without food. I wanted to die at that time. World Vision then built for us a house. We now also have a foster mother who keeps an eye on us. I don't know where my parents are. The war has separated us. I don't know whether they are alive or dead. I like playing in the Child Friendly Space (playground) near to my house. I like learning about maths and science. When I grow up I want to be a pilot."