

FEBRUARY SPEAKER — CHRIS GRANGER
By Bob Connell

Speaker at the February 2011 meeting was Chris Granger, who has worked as a staff photographer at The Times-Picayune newspaper for 16 years, as well as a freelance photographer in New Orleans during most of that time. He is a journalism graduate of L.S.U., where he was chief photographer for the Reveille school newspaper. He has done the photography for three regional cookbooks, one of which, “Real Cajun,” won a national award, and has illustrated articles for several national magazines. His photographic specialties are travel, food, portraits and editorial work.

In his journalism work, Granger is of necessity a generalist, and he engages in no particular specialty at the newspaper. He characterizes his newspaper work as ranging from “Presidents to cupcakes,” from breaking news events to community journalism. This range appeals to him because he has worked at newspapers of all sizes, from school papers to major news outlets. Because of the rapid development of news events, he leads what he characterized as a somewhat schizophrenic existence. News photography is even more hectic now with the advent of cell phones and i-phones.

At odds with the immediacy of news is the reality of rushing to a scene and waiting for hours for the newsworthy moment. Granger illustrated the frustration involved with the example of waiting outside a federal courthouse for three hours for the appearance of a city councilman. The resulting photograph was taken in an instant during a 60-second interview. Sports events are another example, and, in sports, not only must one wait patiently, but vigilantly, for the occurrence of an exciting event. Granger has camped out on the fringes of a baseball field for hours, constantly alert for action that, when it occurs, will have come and gone in a few seconds.

He describes his approach to imaging as “moments between moments,” a concept voiced by several LPS speakers in the past. At a scene or event, he looks for a different angle, a different aspect of a subject, or even something substantially separate from the main event. He stresses the importance of this concept when he is just one in a crowd of news photographers, all looking for a newsworthy image. An example is a photograph taken during a meeting commemorating Martin Luther King Day. He photographed a scene with the word “Martin” visible on a banner attached to a floral arrangement at the event, knowing that virtually everyone would know the context from this single word.

When time permits, Granger enjoys setting up scenes of “quiet moments.” He finds a quiet, serene setting (a deserted park, for example), locates a

likely angle for a good shot, then waits for an interesting person (perhaps even a silhouette), or an animal to walk into it.

Granger also tries to insert an “anchor” into each of his photographs. The anchor is some element within the photograph that not only adds general interest, but provides a point of focus for the eye of the viewer. At the same time, especially in his journalistic efforts, he must deal with scenes exactly as they exist, with little time to set up in advance. In the ubiquitous sunset photograph, he suggests including a boat or tree within the scene. He dislikes “podium shots,” which seldom generate any interest in a viewer. In one instance, he shot an image, not of the speaker, but of the hands of the speaker, modeled by the hands on a sculpture visible in the background.

He spent time in Iraq, photographing the war. He showed images of a night patrol, taken with a flash off-camera, and shots of a prison. One of his most poignant images of this venue was that of a soldier and a civilian reaching through and across a razor-sharp concertina wire barrier to shake hands.

Like most news photographers in N.O., he did extensive work on the aftermath of hurricane Katrina. He admitted that during that time there were numerous places in New Orleans where he felt more apprehensive for his personal safety than he did in Iraq. He displayed numerous poignant and sometimes startling images from that period, including a man feeding water to a tiny, abandoned kitten, bodies in body bags being transported in small boats down a flooded street, a woman singing spirituals in the Superdome, and a vigilante group going about protecting vulnerable neighborhoods from looting and vandalism. Rumors abounded at that time. He was called to investigate and photograph a gymnasium rumored to contain 100 bodies, and he was relieved to find that the gym was actually empty.

For portraiture, Granger for the most part gets face-to-face with his subject. The face is the most likely aspect of portraiture subjects from which a photographer can capture their character. Alternatively, including some element of the subject’s vocation may add vital interest to a portrait. One example was of painter Elemore Morgan, Jr., shown outdoors before his canvas, painting a prairie with migratory birds flying over at near sunset. Although for portraiture out of necessity he must often use flash (off-camera), softboxes and other artificial light, he prefers to use material at hand, such as natural reflectors. He often uses window light as the sole source of lighting for a portrait.