



Exploring Third Places: Q & A with M.K. McFarland

A photographer working at *The Charleston Gazette* in West Virginia, M.K. McFarland created the newspaper's third-places series.

McFarland says there aren't enough places where people can get together and connect. She's made it her mission to seek out and highlight the places where a real sense of community is taking hold in Charleston.

Q. Why did you propose this series?

A. I read a book called *The Great Good Place* by Ray Oldenburg. He talks about the phenomenon of society becoming more separate. We've stopped building sidewalks, stopped building porches. There aren't many places where people get together and talk any more.

The idea was really intriguing to me because in terms of West Virginia, in particular, people have moved away. Besides bars, there's nowhere to meet people and connect. I thought this would be a good way to explore places that are healthy.

Q. How do you find the third places to profile?

A. I did the first one ([Ruff Crowd](#)). I had been talking to one of the reporters in the newsroom about the idea and she took her dog there. She was like, "This is exactly what you're talking about." Then I invited people to write to me about their third places.

Q. Each story has a print piece and a photo slide show, along with audio. Why? How does that work?

A. It's sort of a hybrid between Scott Sharpe's [Postcards from the Road](#) and the Minnesota *Star Tribune's* [Voices for the Land](#). Each of them is something I really enjoy looking at.

We edit the [reader's] letter a little bit, but pretty much we want to keep it the way they wrote it. The text appears in the paper with the photos. The slide show, which is driven by the audio, is what we put online. It's pretty free form.

Q. Tell me a bit about the logistics. How many times do you visit the third place before putting the multimedia presentation together?

A. It's always at least three or four times. For one thing, to get a real sense of the place, you need to visit more than once. That's just photographic story-telling. You're always going to go back several times, because you want to build rapport so the people are relaxed and comfortable. You want them to get a sense of who you are, too. And you want them to feel comfortable, so they can talk the way they normally talk.

And then there are regulars. That's an important part of the story, the people who are sort of the foundation, so you want to make sure you go when they're there. Sometimes, they're on vacation. So you go until you've told the story thoroughly, until you have both sound and photo.

Q. What's the response to the series?

A. I've gotten between 12 and 20 letters describing third places in the area. I don't do it as frequently as I would like, since it's not an official part of my job. I'm assuming we'd get more response if we did it on a more regular basis.

Q. Have you been surprised by the response?

A. No. The truth is I think a lot of people recognize this need. A lot of churches are based on this idea of a small-group model, because they recognize how people are really drawn by the need for community. Some of these big, mega churches, like Willow Creek in Chicago, that's what the model is based on: this need for community. That church has several thousand members because people are looking for community. I think when people find it, they really appreciate what they have and recognize that other people don't have it.

Q. What motivates you to keep doing the series, since it's not part of your official job responsibilities?

A. I like the idea of telling people's stories, and I don't feel like we do a lot of that ... This is a project I could take ownership of and spend time on. For photographers, the best work is personal projects anyway. I would be lying if I didn't say I hope that, eventually, people

would like it and I could work my way into being a full-time multimedia producer.

Q. How do you choose which letters to print?

A. It's based on the quality of the letter and the type of place. There are some places that are more up in the air. Charleston is situated on the river and there was one letter that talked about the water and how it creates its own communities and that is true. The river draws a lot of people, but it would be harder to come up with a concrete way to show that.

In terms of what I would choose to work on, I'm looking for something that is visual. Every time you have people sitting around talking, you're going to have OK sound. And that's fine, but I also want to make sure the visual element is there.

Q. Why did you choose the Lee Street Deli?

A. The [Lee Street Deli](#) was the best letter I got. What she wrote is what I was talking about exactly. Some people have written in and they understand a part of it, but not necessarily the whole thing. I realize as I work on this project that I'm going to have to expand the parameters. I wanted it to be all groups, all ages, all races, but in some cases, I'm going to have to focus on a certain segment of the community in order for it to work. For example, for the [YMCA Health Club](#), I had to focus on the senior citizen community in order to be able to do that story. It's just too big otherwise.

Q. Were there any letters that really resonated with you?

A. The neatest letter I got was about this little town, Cedar Grove, and a bench under the highway there. It's called the Liars' Bench and they even have a sign for it. All these men would get together under this overpass and tell stories about mining and the things they'd done. And all these other people would come and listen to the stories, so the town finally installed a bench. The letter talked about how the town was going to raise money to put in a second bench.

I called the woman who wrote the letter and she said that the bench used to be a really popular place, but that a lot of the older men who visited the bench had died, and there were really only two who met there now. And it's hard to predict when they'll be there, because of

the weather and everything. That's probably a 25-minute drive from here.

The day I drove down to check it out, there was nothing going on. Because it's probably a 70-mile round trip, I can't justify going and not getting anything. But that was my favorite story. I thought it was the coolest thing.

Q. What advice would you give to a photographer who's interested in launching a similar project?

A. Don't get discouraged because people in your newsroom don't support it. I say, be a storyteller and eventually they will support it. When I was doing my master's project, someone said that photographers are always talking about not being recognized and not being valued. I think sometimes you have to go out and lead the way and show people you are valuable and they'll come around. You can't cry because they don't get it.

If you do journalism because you love story-telling, there's nothing like it. If you're in it to tell people's stories and connect with them, this is fun. So much of what we cover is bad news and corruption and this isn't like that. People enjoy it. And sound, for a photographer, is the most exciting thing. I still think still photos are more powerful than video. The video just goes by, but there's power in that one single still image.