TRANSCRIPT

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EPISODE NAME: Medical Photography and Digital Imaging at the University of Vermont College of Medicine

Today on Across the Fence our focus is on photography. We will shoot for the story behind the shot and learn what it takes to make a good photograph. Good afternoon and thanks for joining us I am Keith Silva in for Judy Simpson. If a picture is worth 1000 words then there's a lot to talk about in today's program. From the operating room to the classroom, University of Vermont College of Medicine’s medical photography and digital imaging has a one of a kind view of our modern world. The pictures they create allow us to marvel at modern technology while also reminding us about the fragility of human life. Our guest today is Raj Chawla. He has over 25 years of experience as a photojournalist in Vermont. He runs the Medical Photography and Digital Imaging Unit at the University of Vermont College of Medicine. Welcome to the program. Raj there are lots of specialties in almost anything. What is the focus at UVM College of Medicine's Photography and Digital Imaging Unit?

Raj.: I concentrate on capturing the relationship the medical students have with our faculty, both in a classroom setting and the clinical setting. I photograph the work our researchers do. I cover the events such as reunions and commencement. I may photograph procedures if the doctor or researcher has an interesting case and they want them documented for an article or training system. To provide digital imaging services. We print large format posters. These are very large posters that researchers bring to conferences to present their latest work. Essentially I'm there to document what happens at the medical school. It's a very dynamic place. A lot of training, patient care, research, there’s a lot going on.

Keith.: Photography and digital TV has really come together and they are almost synonymous—now is digital imaging different than photography?

Raj.: Not if you using a digital camera. The digital imaging portion is what happens after the image is taken. It could also be digitizing anything from 35 MM slides to X-rays to any kind of media. It can be assisting in getting an image ready for a journal publication. It can be adding notation, it can be removing elements or adding elements. A lot of the work we do when we're not photographing is helping labs because every lab does its own microscopy. We make sure their monitors are color calibrated making sure that they are assisted with proper capture and storage.
Keith.: Do you use film anymore or is it all digital?

Raj.: It's all digital.

Keith.: It's all digital. Do you miss film?

Raj.: I do. Only when I am not on deadline.

Keith.: Is that one of the advantages of shooting digitally? Is that it's easier to make deadlines. You can shoot something and don't have to wait for to process you don't have to develop it.

Raj.: I typically shoot with either a laptop or an iPad next to me if I am in a controlled situation and I only have to wait about two or three seconds to see a nice big version of what I'm getting.

Keith.: You know instantly that that shot worked or we need to do it again.

Raj.: That comes in when I am doing a portrait maybe there's something specific with the procedure in we have to make sure that we got it lit just right. The cameras right now exceed the abilities of some film and the speed and ease of storage I think are great.

Keith.: We sometimes hear someone say on a TV show, oh not to worry, we'll fix it in post or something like that. Does digital and the software allow you to make lemonade out lemons.

Raj.: It can. It takes a long time and I started in slide film, black and white film and then color negative. It's always easier to do it when you get the picture. When you're taking a picture it's always easier to do it at first. That's expensive it's time consuming the results are not always as good in post. To find the people that can make it as good is very expensive. I prefer to do as much as I can on the front end. If I am shooting a portrait that takes a lot of time making sure the clothes are right, the hair is right because taking something like that afterwards could take hours and it's just more efficient.

Keith.: I was wondering as you are talking about that it's got to be one of those things where people know that to. It used to be you get your photo taken as a portrait and you left it up to them but now people almost know too much. They think it doesn't really matter that that's not right, you can just fix that or something?

Raj.: Just about every portrait I do, I get “Can you make me look younger? Can we fix the hair later?” or something. Most of the time it's joking; I think probably all the time they are joking but there are times where I will help somebody out a little bit. I am not shooting for newspapers anymore and that situation so there are times where I can correct something or fix something or remove something but it's pretty rare.

Keith.: Fletcher Allen is a teaching hospital. You said right off the bat the students are working with the doctors. One of the things you get to do is work with the students. As you take a look at some of your work what's it like to work with a student as opposed to a doctor? Is there any difference?
Raj.: There is a little bit of a difference. The students are not doctors yet they're just getting into the clinical setting. For a lot of them this is the first time. They may have volunteered before medical school or have done some work. They're very eager it's a very nerve wracking situation for them. They're meeting people at their most vulnerable. They're interacting at an incredibly personal level with their patients. The College of Medicine faculty that train them at Fletcher Allen are incredible. They understanding, they are very patient and the students are very smart people. They are very eager, they work very hard and I do think they really care and you can see that in the photographs. I'm very inspired by the effort that they put into it.

Keith.: It's got to be even more nerve wracking when you have somebody there with a camera documenting everything that's happening.

Raj.: Not only for them but for the person training them and the patient. As a whole complicated dynamic that happens especially in a patient care setting. Everybody's aware that I am there, we would discuss it beforehand. I have to get permission and a number of different ways and then it has to go back to normal. Sometimes the situations we're just talking about the weather because I don't want to be present while they're talking about the real situation but sometimes it is the real situation. I keep that in mind and try to keep respect for all three parties involved. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't.

Keith.: Your work to get you out of the hospital medical students get into the community and some of these pictures as I was looking at them before some of these are I think the most fun. It's going to be a lot of fun I know I liked getting out of the studio getting out into the field and doing some work. Are the students having as much fun as the people in these pictures?

Raj.: I think they are. This photo was an emergency department it was a long shift kind of an interesting case. This is a clinic in Winooski, part of a public health project students are doing. They're having a good time they're out there doing what they want to do and what they wanted to do for a long time. They visit elementary schools and work with students there and it's great they'd love it.

Keith.: I've going to think that one of the things about it almost in photography and video and some of these you'd rather be lucky than good. This picture here is a great example. You don't catch that by saying make your eyes pop open. That's just lucky.

Raj.: No they're in a pathology lab. These are high school students that are interested in medicine. It's a pretty serious and crazy thing to pick up an organ. They're very respectful but you do pray for moments like that that you're going to catch that initial reaction. It's tough but boy it is great when you do.

Keith.: I speak for myself when I say I'd rather be lucky than good. As a lot of skill was involved in these critical shots.

Raj.: There's a lot of luck too.

Keith.: Portraits as you mentioned are a big piece of what you do. Is there a secret to making a portrait really stand out?
Raj.: First of all you've got to be honest with your subject. Enough to represent them honestly and in an interesting way. In a portrait you want to use light and composition to draw somebody in to see it. You want the viewer to learn more about the person in the photograph. It's not always easy. You want a photograph to be composed well and dynamic. That's a fair amount of work for me, my work is usually more on the documentary end so I'm following what already happening. Use of color and use of light composition and really good subjects. In this situation here it's a very crowded and busy lab a lot of things on the benches so you almost have to pick your little area to work in and use light.

Keith.: I think that's a great example when talking about crowded benches and things like that. These are these people's workplaces and you shoot a lot of people in their workplace. A laboratory is not a studio it's not a place where you can control a lot of stuff that that's what doing your work is about is capturing the moment the documentary field of things.

Ray. Yes the laboratory is a busy place. It's a crowded place that's got a lot of devices around there are not necessarily photogenic. A lot of things the researchers themselves and their team have created from scratch. Much like the port we saw of the woman in the lab you have to pick out your locations you have to isolate what's going on and pay attention to the people. If you keep the people in the forefront and keep it tight and simple it will succeed.

Keith.: I want to talk about some of these photos. This is inside a box essentially. How do you shoot outside of the box?

Raj.: This is a fume hood. This is one of those situations where it's obviously very set up. The camera is in the fume hood it's on a trigger and I am shooting off the laptop so I can see how it's tweaking and then ask him to do what he does. This is one of our researchers.

Keith.: So you are not tucked inside that hood?

Raj.: Thankfully no. The bummer for him is now he has to completely clean and sanitize that hood but when he sees the photograph it becomes worth it.

Keith.: One of the most unique places too shoot has to be an operating room it's one of those things I'd like to try to shoot in their one time to see what happens. You've been there what's it like to shoot for your job, to be in the OR.

Raj.: It's a little overwhelming sometimes. I describe it sometimes much like my work use to be in news; a lot of waiting for something very brief. There's a lot of people usually are working in an operating room it's obviously a very serious environment. I can’t really go, I have to stay in one place. Depending on what I'm doing if I am photographing if my purpose is to capture photographs of people who are doing work I'm concentrating on them. The modern operating room or the operating room is different than what I expected. The patients are very much covered up and not releasing anything except for the area that they're working on. It's very busy.

Keith.: And probably not a lot of tweaking there where you can ask them could you do that again?

Raj.: There is no control. If I am photographing for the surgeon and they want me to capture procedure they will bring me and I want a photograph of this I have to do it quickly and then
back I go. It's exciting. Couple years ago I was able to see my first open heart surgery and that was a thrill it was special.

Keith.: A couple minutes left. I want to ask since we have an expert on set with us. Is it all about the gear? I think television production photography people think I really need a really good camera or nowadays with digital I need really good software. Does owning a really good camera make you a really good photographer?

Raj.: No. I think the more serious you are the better the camera you want. The longer it will last and the more it will do. The more you learn the better the camera you're going to want because you're going to want to do more things with it. Software I don't think it is as important these days. I think with digital the learning curve has shot way up. People are able to see results instantly now. I always recommend digital SLR's as opposed to point and shoot cameras especially for people that are interested in photography but the equipment is so good now you don't need to spend a ton of money. Certainly spending more than you were in the film days but...

Keith.: And it's an upfront cost. We were talking about this before the taping it's an upfront cost if you buy the stuff in the camera up front and invest in a quality camera but probably do very well.

Raj.: Right I think get a decent midlevel body spend some money but spend money on the lenses. Commit to a system and buy good lenses. The lenses will last through multiple camera bodies and these days the reality is you're going to go through camera bodies more quickly than you ever would. My parents owned the same film camera for 15-20 years. I keep my cameras for three.

Keith.: Raj thank you very much a really appreciate this talking about your work and what you do. I want to thank everyone here at WCAX for making this program possible and as always thank you for stopping by Across the Fence.

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