

Mary Beth Meehan

City of Champions

A Cape Verdean man in a white mask and food service uniform working in a salad dressing factory, a Haitian bride in a white dress fanning herself on her wedding day, an older white woman standing at a table with a single candle in her home—these are some of the people in Mary Beth Meehan's banners displayed on a building at the corner of Crescent and Main Streets in downtown Brockton, Massachusetts.

Photography has long been recognized for its ability to give visibility to unacknowledged individuals and groups. It is in this spirit that Rhode Island-based photographer Mary Beth Meehan used the camera to document the shifting demographic of her hometown of Brockton. Growing up, Meehan was surrounded by the children and grandchildren of European immigrants drawn to the city by the busy shoe factories. Much has changed since then: with the collapse of the manufacturing industry in the past half century, Brockton was left in ruins. Since Meehan left in the 1980s, the city also experienced a new wave of immigration. Families from Haiti, Africa, Cape Verde, and Latin America, along with African Americans, joined the previous generations of immigrants in Brockton. Meehan observed a lack of tolerance and understanding from older residents, which was only exacerbated by their willful avoidance of "others." By creating banner-portraits of the diverse residents of Brockton and placing them on public buildings and structures downtown, Meehan made her subjects so visible that they were impossible to ignore or avoid. In this manner, she challenged misconceptions about both the city and its people.

The idea for *City of Champions* came to the photographer during a conversation with Jill Wiley of the Brockton Cultural Council, which gave Meehan funding in 2010. Realizing the idea presented new obstacles, however. It was not working on the large

scale that proved challenging but rather selecting the right images for the project. And then there was the task of getting permission from city hall and landlords to display her banners on public buildings. To Meehan's surprise, the built environment and people were interconnected: her project became as much about the foreclosed and abandoned public buildings as it was about the residents suffering from the impact of the economic recession. Unexpectedly, these abandoned places often became the available spaces for the display of Meehan's work. In 2012, Meehan displayed twelve banners in downtown Brockton.

With a B.A. in English from Amherst College and an M.A. in photojournalism from the University of Missouri, Meehan has been focusing on photographing her own communities. Her work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Boston Globe*, and the French publication *6Mois*. Meehan has received awards from Pictures of the Year International and The National Conference for Community and Justice and has two Pulitzer Prize nominations. A committed teacher, Meehan worked with Brockton students to help them create their own banners, also on public display. Her current project focuses on children and immigration.

City of Champions engendered feelings of pride and inspired debate. In the end, the reception was mostly positive. As the "first multi-ethnic, multi-generational portrayal of the city," *City of Champions* not only references the name that the city was given for its boxing victories but also suggests that Brockton still endures as a city of champions even during difficult times.

For more information about the artist and *City of Champions*, please visit: www.marybethmeehan.com and www.cityofchampionsproject.com.

— Francine Weiss, Ph.D.



TOP: A photograph of a young boxer is installed on the building owned by "Tuxedos by Merian," a third-generation tuxedo rental and former bridal shop that has stood on Main Street in Brockton since the 1950s. It is placed next to a banner installed by the Merians honoring Brockton's native boxers, Rocky Marciano and "Marvelous" Marvin Hagler who gave the city its nickname—"City of Champions."

LEFT: Turon Andrade, whose parents are from Cape Verde, takes up the mantle of boxing made famous by Brockton natives Rocky Marciano and "Marvelous" Marvin Hagler. He works out at the Petronelli Brothers Gym, where Hagler also trained.

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TOP: Two photographs of incidents from Brockton's largest immigrant groups — East and Cape Verde — are installed together at the corner of Main and Chestnut Streets, Brockton.

ABOVE LEFT: Lady Mitchell, who was born in Haiti, prepares for her wedding day at her family's home in Brockton.

ABOVE RIGHT: Photo-dobbie, from Cape Verde, works at Gody's Dobbie, a solid dressing factory in Brockton.

RIGHT: Facing Main Street is a photograph of native Brocktonian Candye Mathers, wife of one of the city's most prominent retired judges. She is photographed in her home, on the more prosperous west side of the city, where Brockton's past economic glory is still visible.





LEFT: A photograph of Melissa Cruz, Bradenton High School student and vocalist in the marching band, is the biggest mural in the installation, at 20 feet wide, and faces City Hall Plaza. Melissa's parents are from the Dominican Republic.

TOP: A portrait of Nancy DeSouza is installed on the exterior of Messiah Baptist Church, an Legion Parkway, in Dadeville. While Legion Parkway was once a vibrant thoroughfare, it has since passed through decades of decay. It is now on the upswing, with new businesses sprouting in the area.

BOTTOM: Nancy DeSouza poses for a portrait on Main Street. Nancy's family is from Cape Verde.

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TGP: A photograph of Ashleigh Bruns is installed at 1 North Main Street, on the Brockton Community Access building, the city's community cable television station.

LEFT: Ashleigh Bruns poses with a bouquet of spring flowers, which she and her friends plucked from City Hall Plaza.