

## EXTRAORDINARY CHILD, BY MARY ELLEN MARK

### **About the Project**

In the summer of 2005, I was asked to produce five photographic portfolios for the Morgunbladid Newspaper. One of the projects I requested to photograph was a school for disabled children in Reykjavik. The newspaper arranged for me to spend a day at Öskjuhlíðarskóli. It was an unforgettable day. I immediately fell in love with the children as I followed them through their daily activities, which included a swimming class. It was in that swimming class that I met one young boy that especially won my heart. This boy walked with the aid of a walker with unimaginable effort and was fearless in the water. He used precious few words but had a strong presence. I took many photographs of him swimming. On the bus ride back to school, he sat in front of me and kept leaning around his seat to make sure I was still there. His name: Alexander.

That afternoon, my friend Inga took me to the showroom of an Icelandic fashion designer, Steinunn Sigurd. When we were introduced she asked what I was doing in Iceland. I told her about my day at Öskjuhlíðarskóli and how impressed I was with the school and children. I told her I had made a special friend in a boy called Alexander. Steinunn smiled proudly and said, "Alexander is my son." It was fate.

I've always believed in fate, and I took this to be a sign that I should follow my heart and continue with this project.

When the pictures from my day at Öskjuhlíðarskóli were published in Morgunbladid, there was a very strong, positive, public response. And of course, Alexander was on the front page. The photographs were seen by the National Museum of Iceland's Director, Margrét Hallgrímsdóttir. She then contacted me through Alexander's mother, Steinunn. Margrét felt that a project on disabled children in Iceland would make a powerful exhibition for the museum. This was especially relevant because the National Museum of Iceland had just been awarded a Special Commendation from the European Museum Forum in 2006. This commendation was for the museum's commitment to raise awareness and respect for all museum visitors and provide excellent access for all guests.

I was very excited by the National Museum's proposal. All year I very much looked forward to returning to Reykjavik to work because I had been thinking about Alexander and the other children I met at Öskjuhlíðarskóli ever since I left Iceland.

I returned to Iceland in August of 2006 and was given complete access to two schools and a day care center for disabled children in Reykjavik. The Öskjuhlíðarskóli is mostly for higher functioning children. Safamýraraskóli is for more severely affected children. The Lyngás Day Care Center cares for the full spectrum of disability. The children I photographed ranged from mildly disabled, both physically and mentally, to profoundly disabled.

Rather than an experience of despair, the seven weeks I spent with these extraordinary children was one of enlightenment and hope. I quickly discovered that within each child, even those who seemed totally disconnected, there is always a personality and a relationship to be made. I was moved by the children's inner-strength and was also touched by the devotion of the teachers, caretakers, and families. I hope my photographs convey the strength of these children as well as my great respect for them.

During the seven weeks that we spent in Iceland (over three separate trips), my husband Martin Bell, made a film, "Alexander", focusing on Alexander and his relationship with his parents (Steinunn & Palli), grandparents (Edda & Siggi), friends, teachers, and even his dog; Rocky. Martin's film also visits Öskjuhlíðarskóli, Safamýrarskóli, and Lyngás. The film shows how the teachers and caretakers make a strong connection with the higher functioning disabled children as well as with children who on the surface seem unreachable.

As chief curator, producer and coordinator Margrét Hallgrímsdóttir, from the National Museum of Iceland, was the driving force behind this project. As others, besides Martin and myself added their contributions, the project grew:

Ívar Brynjólfsson is an Icelandic photographer who works for the National Museum of Iceland. He was a student at the Art Institute in San Francisco. His beautiful interior photographs perfectly capture the atmosphere of both schools.

Ingibjörg Jóhannsdóttir is an Icelandic artist, print maker, and educator. She is the head of the Reykjavík School of Visual Art. She has curated a group of paintings made by children at both schools. This artwork shows the strong creative force that exists in the children. Many of these paintings were made by profoundly disabled children.

Einar Falur Ingólfsson, is a photo editor and also an accomplished photographer and journalist. It was Einar Falur who originally assigned me to photograph at Öskjuhlíðarskóli. There is no one better suited to write about my work and these children.

In my life as a photographer it is very rare to be given such a remarkable opportunity to make photographs. "Extraordinary Child" is the kind of project that brought me to photography. I hope that after seeing the exhibition, the book and the film, the audience will have a more intimate way of viewing children with disabilities because they are truly extraordinary. To paraphrase Alexander's mother, Steinunn, "A lot of people have never dealt with disability before. For those people who have not experienced it we hope we can bring them into that world because you learn so much about yourself by entering their world." - Mary Ellen Mark

### **About the Photographer**

MARY ELLEN MARK has achieved worldwide visibility through her numerous books,

exhibitions and editorial magazine work. She has published photo-essays and portraits in such publications as LIFE, New York Times Magazine, Rolling Stone, The New Yorker, and Vanity Fair. For over four decades, she has traveled extensively to make pictures that reflect a high degree of humanism. Today, she is recognized as one of our most respected and influential photographers. Her images of our world's diverse cultures have become landmarks in the field of documentary photography. Her portrayals of Mother Teresa, Indian circuses, and brothels in Bombay were the product of many years of work in India. A photo essay on runaway children in Seattle became the basis of the academy award nominated film STREETWISE, directed and photographed by her husband, Martin Bell.

To purchase the book, visit: <http://www.amazon.com/Mary-Allen-Mark-Extraordinary-Child/dp/9979790148>