



Portraits of survivors;  
photographer Dese'rae L.  
Stage (right)

# FACES OF SURVIVAL

A photographer converts self-destruction into strength.

BY ELIZABETH NGUYEN

**I**t takes courage to talk about your suicide attempt, but photographer Dese'Rae L. Stage tells her story with hardly a hitch. The events are dramatic, the emotions palpable. However, Stage's willingness to be vulnerable—to be open with the details and honest with her feelings—is the most powerful aspect of her narrative. In this spirit of openness, Stage photographed herself and posted her face, full name and survivor status online. This was the beginning of what would become the *Live Through This: Life on the Other Side of a Suicide Attempt* project.

*Live Through This* is a portrait collection of survivors and their stories. The portraits are shared online in an effort to start conversations, provide emotional support and encourage survivors to "own their experiences publicly and proudly."

"Suicide is something that affects all of us," says Stage, who is embarking on a coast-to-coast tour to photograph more survivors. Her Kickstarter campaign raised over \$22,000 to fund the trek. She intends to put "faces to the numbers," humanizing an issue that is often told in statistics or simply left in silence. Each portrait is a snapshot of human emotion and experience. "You're sitting down with a person who is telling you about the darkest time in their life," says Stage. Her volunteers are often telling their story for the first time, and they don't skip any details. They go through the build-up, their attempt, and describe where they are now. They talk about whether they're glad that they lived, whether they're not glad, or whether they might still die by suicide. Afterwards, Stage takes a photo.

"It's hard to hear and it's emotional, but I think it's necessary," says Stage, who holds a degree in psychology and is trained in crisis intervention. "A lot of the stories right now are pretty positive... I think it's important to talk about the positive and negative when it comes to being a suicide attempt survivor."

*Live Through This* emerged from Stage's personal struggles with cutting, an abusive lesbian relationship, and her own suicide attempt. She recalls a time when her partner gave her a black eye: "I'm 5 foot 7 inches so I'm fairly tall, but she was like 5 foot 2 inches and she just punched me right in the face and knocked me out one day, and I had to go to work like that. We worked together—we did everything together. So, when I went to work with a black eye, I remember somebody looking at me and making a joke about rough sex. And she was standing next to me, and I was just so mortified."

Stage is troubled by the silence surrounding lesbian partner violence. "I think it does happen a lot more than anybody knows, and that because we live in a heteronormative society, 'girl-on-girl violence,' as Tina Fey would say, isn't really even acknowledged. We don't even acknowledge it as real or as domestic abuse when it very much is."

Since her Kickstarter campaign, *Live Through This* has received waves of support. Over 200 survivors have contacted Stage in hopes of participating. She also gets emails from family or friends seeking to include a lost loved one on her website. "I find myself reading my emails and crying all the time. I've been making this joke, like, 'Man, I need therapy at the end of every day.' But it's a good thing."

Stage admires the bravery of her volunteers. "I've kind of fallen in love with all of these people. They're not just telling me their story—they're letting me take a picture of them, they're using their full names. There's no anonymity in this project at all, and that's huge." Stage is also proud of her own willingness to be open. "I don't love talking about that time in my life. It does hurt. It is painful. I know that there are people who judge you. But I guess I'm just willing to put it out there so something good can happen, and that other people know they're not alone." (livethroughthis.org) ●



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