



# THE ART OF STORY

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How two photographers are teaching the next generation of visual storytellers



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hey say a picture is worth a thousand words—but how do you make sure it says the right words? How do you capture an image that tells the most honest version of the story? How do you clearly communicate important details? Zack Arias can teach you if, for ten days, you're willing to give up everything except a passport and a camera.

In the beginning, Zack didn't take photography seriously. His father was an amateur photographer, and when Zack was 15, his dad gave him a camera. "In high school I joined the yearbook staff," he said. "I used photography as a hall pass."

After high school, Zack went to college because "that's what you're supposed to do," but he struggled to maintain his grades at Piedmont. He turned back to photography as an elective course to help boost his grades—a class that ended up changing the direction of his life when the professor pulled him aside to say, "You've got talent."

The professor believed in Zack, and she helped him apply to the University of Georgia School of Art in 1993. He got in, but his mindset wasn't there yet. "I kept asking people, 'How will I make money from this?' And they kept telling me that it should be a passion," he said.

He ended up failing out of school and moving back in with his dad. In his early 20s, and feeling miserable, he sold everything he owned, bought a VW bus, and hit the road for six months. Then, a few things happened.

He discovered an inexpensive two-year commercial photography program. It was the birth of his career. Then, in 1996, he watched *Schindler's List* for the first time. "What dawned on me after watching it was that someone used film as a medium to tell a story that affected people's lives," he said. "Someone could see this movie even years later and be affected by it. So I decided I was going to be a photojournalist."

Learning it was hard to make money in photojournalism, he used commercial photography and workshops as a way to fund his passion projects. While working on a partnership with Fuji in Morocco, he came up with an idea on how to use his commercial work for the greater good. He called up a friend he'd met from a previous workshop, Andre Berg. Andre was working with an organization trying to make secondary schools accessible for Moroccan children in remote villages. "I told him that I had to work on promo material for this new Fuji camera, and I wanted to help whoever I was photographing. The money from Fuji covered my expenses. On the trip, we produced imagery and video that Fuji could use but also that the education organization could use," Zack said.

During a dinner after the trip, Andre asked Zack what was next. At that table, the DED-PXL Tour was born. "I had an idea of a workshop where people meet me at an airport with their passport and their camera," said Zack. "They have no idea where we're going, and we do something like the work we were doing in Morocco."



**"I WANTED US TO LEARN ABOUT THE CULTURE, ABOUT THE PEOPLE AND WHAT THEY'RE DOING IN THEIR LIFE—NOT BE TOURISTS, BUT GUESTS."**





“Sometimes the clichéd idea of philanthropy is the poor little child with flies on her mouth. ‘Look at this child! Don’t you want to feed her!’” said Zack. “In Morocco it was healthy kids with food and loving families. The story should be, ‘Look at these healthy kids and how much better off they can be with education! They’re just people who have challenges in front of them. Images and video can tell that story—no sympathy; we’re looking for empathy.”

Andre turned out to be the perfect partner for Zack’s workshop idea. He was already working full-time with philanthropic organizations all over the world, but not just any organizations—only ones that truly met the needs of local communities. “The money isn’t always ending up in the right hands,” he said. “It’s important for the people in those communities to have a voice of some kind.”

“You don’t go build houses in a city that tells you that they need a school,” said Zack.

Andre knew how important good imagery could be for a philanthropic organization. “It’s hard for some to spend money on non-project related things,” Andre said. “So a lot of these organizations don’t have good photos to tell their story, and with the dawn of social media, the need is more important than ever.”

Zack and Andre put their heads together, Zack planning the technical photography skills he would share and Andre planning the details of the trip. “It isn’t easy to pull off from a planning standpoint,” Andre said. “It’s not about getting the most applications; it’s about getting the right applications. Then there’s details to work out, like making sure everyone has a passport, and things like proper vaccines.”

“I also didn’t want this to be poverty tourism,” said Zack. “I didn’t want to be well-off, privileged people going into a community. I wanted us to learn about the culture, about the people, what they’re doing in their life—not be tourists, but guests.”

Three years after their fateful dinner, the first DEDPXL Tour finally came to fruition. Eight photographers signed up—for what, they weren’t 100 percent sure, but they all shared a sense of adventure and excitement for the unknown ahead. “We set up an online group for the trip, so we got to know each other a little before we met in person,” said Zack.

They met in Johannesburg, where they spent two days before their first blind trip to Soweto Township, where Nelson Mandela was raised. “The townships are shanty towns that the black people were forced to move to during Apartheid,” said Zack. “We worked with an education initiative trying to update the curriculum in the township schools. They take in tablets and have the students play with apps. They took in a 3D printer—this in a place where most people’s only computer is their smartphone.”

While they were there, tourist bus after tourist bus came through, stopped at Mandela’s home, and left. The DEDPXL group stayed in



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a hostel, ate at the local spots, and played soccer with the kids. In other words, they learned the true story of Soweto, and immersing themselves in the community allowed them to capture it on film.

From there, they traveled to Gaborone, Botswana, and to Windhoek, Namibia, often only warning the group, “Be packed and ready to go at 5 a.m.” They traveled by bus, plane, and Toyota 4x4s. They stayed in lodges, in hostels, and sometimes in 5-star accommodations. But everywhere they went, they made a point to get to know the people who lived there, to eat with them and talk with them. How can you tell people’s story when they haven’t shared it with you?

“We want to have personal and intimate conversations with the people we visit,” said Andre. “Just to get a little bit more insight on the world they’re living in on a day-to-day basis. Photographers might go out looking for a picture, but that’s not how you shape your craft. The best thing a photographer can do is learn to be patient—connect the impressions they experience with the images they capture. I think we are making people into better storytellers.”

After ten packed days, it was time to head back home. The tour had been successful for the photographers and the philanthropies they worked with along the way. Zack was thrilled with the results. “I could tell they were more confident photographers by the end,” he said. “They weren’t afraid to get in there and get the picture.”

Zack and Andre just completed a second DEDPXL Tour this past October, with three more tours planned over the next three years. “This time the trip sold out less than 24 hours after we announced it,” said Andre. “Out of the eight people who came on the first trip, about half of them returned for the second.”

Although they would love to do more than one trip a year, Zack and Andre decided to focus on quality over quantity. “We don’t want to do cookie-cutter trips,” said Zack. “And these take a year of planning. Andre is a master at this.”

“We work with locals and non-profits, so there’s a lot behind the scenes,” Andre said. “It’s a unique offering, and I don’t want it to be inflated by lowering the quality of what the people who travel with us experience.”

As for where the 2020 trip is headed, nobody knows—but if you’re willing to drop everything but your passport and a camera for ten days, you can find out.

## FUTUREAZANIA

Breaking down barriers to STEM technology



**“THE GOLDEN THREAD IS THE SAME:  
UNDERSTANDING WHAT PEOPLE’S HOPES  
AND DREAMS ARE.”**

“All of the jobs our kids are getting ready for won’t exist in ten years. The jobs that will exist don’t exist yet,” said Lufuno Muthubi. She wants to change that.

Lufuno grew up in Soweto, South Africa, a neighborhood that played a major role during the fight to end Apartheid. Buses full of tourists make rounds in front of Nelson Mandela’s former home in Soweto, stopping just long enough for a museum tour before returning to nearby Johannesburg.

While Johannesburg thrives, Soweto is stuck in a cycle of poverty—a cycle that starts with education. “South Africa is a very new democracy compared to the rest of Africa. We are still trying to find our feet because our gruesome past has taken 90 percent of our history,” said Lufuno.

“I go into township schools and the curriculum is still the same as when I was in school. The way they’re learning is very colonial based. Math and science are all around us now, and I wanted to make those things tangible

to students. When kids are stimulated and they learn, it sticks.”

So, after 12 years in marketing, Lufuno quit her job and went to the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS) to study social entrepreneurship. “The idea has always percolated in my mind that you don’t know what you don’t know. Most of the people I grew up with don’t have access to information,” said Lufuno.

After finishing the program at GIBS, Lufuno created FutureAzania to break down the barriers to STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) education for township students. “Azania means the ‘Tip of Africa.’ FutureAzania felt like creating a new Africa, particularly in education—creating a new breed of Africans to create solutions for African-specific problems,” she said.

Lufuno took her idea back to Soweto and looked for a partner school. “I grew up with the principal of the first school I approached. He was trusting





## “IF WE CHANGE JUST ONE THING—WE GIVE ACCESS TO INFORMATION TO JUST ONE GENERATION—IT CHANGES EVERYTHING.”

of what I wanted to do,” she said. “Then I just had to learn how to do it. It was trial and error, but we let the kids show us what they were interested in.”

Lufuno started teaching students after school, bringing in iPads and 3-D printers to develop STEM skills that could help break the cycle of poverty in the township. “We started with art, then how to animate. We taught them how to code and brought that around to advanced math and science,” she said. “I see a lot of curiosity that has been sparked. Students are realizing for the first time that math can be fun—that you can use it to build robots and design apps.”

After a successful intervention at one school, Lufuno began to expand FutureAzania into other schools. She started a second after-school program and Saturday morning school program, altogether changing the lives of over 150 students. “It was easy moving into the next two schools because we had a case reference,” she said. “We were able to showcase the impactful things that were coming out of our programs.”

Kids as young as five years old can be a part of her curriculum, which provides a foundation for success that would have otherwise been out of reach. “The way it usually goes is how your parents lived, chances are, you will live in that same environment, and so will your kids,” said Lufuno. “If we change just one thing—we give access to information to just one generation—it changes everything.”

FutureAzania began as a three-person team and has grown to a six-person team. Lufuno faces two hurdles as she continues to grow: gaining legitimacy with the South African government and raising funds. “I have to start thinking about the opportunities for us to grow our business in Africa, and that involves being in a space to leave the country,” she said. “Our government trusts you more if you prove you can do work elsewhere, so I’m working on expanding to American inner cities. The school environments are similar to townships; those schools are going through similar things as far as lack of access to technology goes.”

As FutureAzania works toward scaling up, Lufuno maintains that making students successful involves meeting them where they are. “We can take what we’re building here, customize it, and understand what people want to do and who they are,” she said. “The golden thread is the same: understanding what people’s hopes and dreams are.”

FutureAzania is leveling the playing field for students who used to be able to access the internet only through smartphones. A few years ago, these students couldn’t even dream of becoming a game developer or graphic designer—those jobs were completely inaccessible—but Lufuno has opened the door to a whole new pool of talent. “We are making learning dynamic and interactive,” she said.

If you want to help FutureAzania educate a new generation of students, donate at [futureazania.com/get-involved/](https://futureazania.com/get-involved/)





## AZAMAT ALEUETY PRIVATE FOUNDATION

Fighting the discrimination and stigmatization against those with psycho-social disabilities



**B**efore Azamat was born, Almagul had not spent much time around people with physical or/and intellectual disabilities. Azamat had cerebral palsy, visual impairment, and organic brain damage. In Kazakhstan, resources for people with psycho-social disabilities are scarce, and many families have to put their children into the care of the state—first in a children’s institution, then an adult institution at age 18. This was not an option for Almagul and her husband, who never considered giving up their son.

“I started thinking differently and getting a new perspective after my son was born,” she said. “This is how I started working in the sphere of special education.”

She started working at National Center of Correctional Pedagogy, quitting her job as a law school teacher in 2007 to devote her full attention to becoming an expert in the center. While there, she created a scientific laboratory on special education for Kazakh speaking children. “People were questioning why we need this,” she said. “Now after 12 years, we are doing scientific methodological research for the whole country. I sometimes think that if I was just a lawyer, maybe I would make more money—but it wouldn’t be worth it.”

In those 12 years she accomplished more than research, and she helped more than children. In fact, one of her passions is helping adults with psycho-social disabilities develop life skills. In 2015, she and her family created the Azamat Aleuety Private Foundation to help people like her son be able to live independent lives outside of institutions. “We decided to name the organization after my son,” she said. “I wanted it to show that he has potential and he has a future—and I also have potential. It opened up when my son was born.”

Life skills that most of us take for granted—cooking, sewing, and cleaning—can be a key to independence and freedom. Children with psycho-social disabilities are rarely taught these skills—even the ones who grow up living with their parents instead of in an institution. “When we teach a person and they are able to do this—cut bread or stitch clothing—they probably were capable of doing this their whole life. What I found was that it was lack of trust that was keeping them from developing these skills,” said Almagul. “Parents often do not trust their children, or they care too much to give them freedom to do things on their own. I still have to fight with myself not to be overprotective of my son.”

“My son is very special. He has a lot of hidden possibilities and qualities that typical people do not have. I learned from my son and his friends how to be open and how to articulate what worries me, something typically not done in our society,” she said.





Almagul's son is 24 now, and able to have a supported independent lifestyle. "Azamat started asking questions like 'When am I going to live separately?' and 'When am I going to have my tea when I really want it?' We realized he has a full right to demand his freedom," she said.

Almagul worked with other adults to fight for their freedom too. She's witnessed first hand that giving them the opportunity to resocialize can completely change their outlook. "One boy was given to a children's institution when his mother was unable to care for him," said Almagul. "She still visited him all the time. When he turned 18 she wanted to bring him back home, but the institution wouldn't let her. He was deprived of legal help, so our organization and human rights defenders came in to prove she had a right to take him home. The court agreed he could go back to his family, and he has been thriving since then. He used to be an introvert, and now he is very happy and communicable—a completely different person."

After seeing successful independence in the lives of her son and his friends, Almagul is taking steps to make an impact that lasts long after she and her husband are gone. The first step towards that goal is building a halfway home where adults can learn and develop skills to live independently with as much or little assistance as they need. "Kazakhstan has some programs and social benefits for children, but adults don't have that support," she said. "All we have to offer adults now is being placed into institutions. We want to be able to build these houses around the country and make it sustainable."



Another step is encouraging more Kazakh people to give those with psycho-social disabilities a chance to live normally. "Even families do not believe their grown up children can be independent and live a normal life," she said. "So what I say to those parents is that we were chosen by God to be parents of special people. If you refuse to accept this, you will never have a full-fledged life. I'm 48 now, and half of my life I was a very happy person. The other half of my life, when I've had my son, I was even happier."

The DEDPXL Tour crew visited Almagul during their most recent trip to take photos for the Azamat Aleuety Private Foundation. Almagul hopes to use those photos to help her community connect with people like her son. "When people see them and talk to them, they realize that they deserve to be here," she said.

Almagul is proud that her son is an example that psycho-social disabilities do not prevent people from being able to live full, rich lives. Her advocacy for her son has changed many lives, and will continue to give people the dignified lives that they deserve. "I just understand that people have a lot of stereotypes and fears, and it's not about them—it's about us," she said. "I stand for my son and people like him, and together we fight against discrimination and stigmatization." □