

Bringing home the faces of Iraq

BORDERING ON TREASON
WILL DOCUMENT NEW PALTZ
PHOTOJOURNALIST LORNA
TYCHOSTUP'S WORK IN A WAR-
TORN COUNTRY

Street-smart child of Manhattan's Hell's Kitchen and longtime mid-Hudson resident, divorced mother of two, photographer and journalist Lorna Tychostup never thought of herself as the sort of person who would have a documentary made about her. But, thanks to an impulsive decision on the cusp of the US invasion of Iraq in early 2003 – a decision that has shaped the arc of her life ever since – such a documentary is in fact being made.

In June, sneak previews of the work-in-progress, titled *Bordering on Treason*, were screened at the Rosendale Theatre and the Elting Memorial Library in New Paltz. Filmmaker Trish Dalton is trying to raise funds for the documentary's completion, supplementing a \$17,000 grant from the New York State Council on the Arts, and to elicit feedback from audiences as to how to fine-tune the rough cut that currently exists.

Dalton met Tychostup back in 2003 while compiling footage for a documentary that was initially conceived as a broader portrait of several antiwar activists. But she found Tychostup's fiery determination so compelling that the film's focus quickly honed in on a tighter target. Since then she has hooked up with Tychostup on several of her subsequent trips to the war-torn region, as well as back here in the US. She also interviewed Tychostup's daughter Lacey, now 27, and son Josh, now 32, to find out what it was like to be a high school or college student whose Mom was dodging bullets and bombs to get photos of Iraqi civilians.

The title of the documentary derives from an insult hurled at Tychostup when she appeared on Fox News's *Hannity and Colmes* talk show, shortly before her first trip to Iraq. That footage is included in the documentary. We see Tychostup keeping her cool while the interviewer gets progressively more strident, saying that Tychostup's planned journey was "villainous," "bordered on treason" and was tantamount to "aiding and abetting the enemy." In fact, the photojournalist's only political agenda was to bring home the faces of the Iraqi people to American audiences – or, as Tychostup puts it, "We had damn well be ready to look in the eyes of the people we are going to kill."

The black-and-white images that she succeeding in bringing home, of ordinary Iraqi civilians going about their daily lives, are powerful and poignant, especially considering the years of destruction that would soon befall their country. One cannot look at these warm, expressive faces of mothers and children, shopkeepers, artisans and village elders without wondering who among them is still alive. Tychostup quickly found her genius for connecting with these "foreign" people and eliciting natural reactions from them. "I knew that all I had to do was to get them to pop open for a minute," she says in the film. "Afterwards



PHOTOS BY LORNA TYCHOSTUP

they develop within me, and I carry them around...If any of them are dead, they'll still live through these photographs."

That turned out to be only the first of many visits to Iraq as the war dragged on. A visit in early 2004 documented firsthand the experiences of American troops, including the persistent unavailability of replacement parts for vehicles and equipment. Tychostup rode around with a platoon in an armored personnel carrier during the coldest time of the year; the soldiers had been waiting for eight months for delivery of parts to fix its broken heater. "Most of the ones I talked to want to come home," she says of her sojourn with the troops.

During her third trip, in the summer of 2004, "I was on the street with the people as much as I could be," says Tychostup. She filmed a joyful wedding and the desperate living conditions in a squatter camp, and interviewed an Iraqi who had been released from the notorious Abu Ghraib prison. And the more time that she spent "in country," the more she began to discover that the political nuances of American involvement there were much more complex than she had initially imagined. Upon her return, she says, she got thrown off WBAI radio for reporting that "many Iraqis love Bush."

Tychostup returned to cover the Iraqi elections in early 2005, and found that the people wouldn't leave the long lines at the polling places even when gunfire erupted nearby. But for all the excitement, it was also an increasingly dangerous time for American journalists. She began to wear a *hijab* for her own protection, especially when visiting the fundamentalist hotbed of Sadr City. "I almost got killed a couple



PHOTO OF LORNA TYCHOSTUP BY DOMINIQUE LAW

of times" on that trip, she reports.

Although Tychostup had a professional affiliation with the Hudson Valley's *Chronogram* magazine, her photojournalistic work was beholden to no particular media sponsor or assignment. She used her growing network of personal and government contacts in Iraq to follow up on whatever leads she discovered and expose herself to many different points of view. The result was a body of work that was as notable for its complexity, independence and lack of preconceived agenda as for its visual power, and it began to attract international notice. She took her photos on the lecture circuit, and in 2006 was invited to speak at the Independent and Radical Book Fair in



Edinburgh. *Bordering on Treason* includes moving footage of an installation of the American Friends Service Committee's "Eyes Wide Open" project, which paired blow-ups of Tychostup's photographs of Iraqis with row upon row of thousands of pairs of boots that had belonged to troops killed in the war.

One of the first thing that she discovered while trying to get around in the war zone, Tychostup reports, is how little connection there seemed to be between actual on-the-ground experience and how much credibility a person could wield as a pundit on the Iraq situation. This was particularly true for women journalists. So she determined to take steps to enhance her professional credentials. In 2009 she completed her Master's in Global Affairs at New York University, which led to work as a communications and outreach specialist with the US Agency for International Development in Baghdad.

Also under her belt now is a two-and-a-half-year stint consulting for an environmental group called Nature Iraq, which is working on reclamation of the Tigris/Euphrates marshlands near Iraq's border with Iran. This unusual ecosystem – home to the so-called "Marsh Arabs" or Ma'dan, who live in houses woven from reeds and are thought by some scholars to be the descendants of the ancient Sumerians – was critically endangered by huge drainage and water diversion projects undertaken by Saddam Hussein's government before the war.

Today, Lorna Tychostup is back in the US, living in New Paltz and sizing up her next move. Based on her by-now-considerable experience working with Non-Governmental Organizations in the Mideast, she's trying to get a communications and outreach consultancy business

off the ground, building a client base of "international experts who need to develop a public profile," she says. Marketing and branding, Web design and event planning, including international conferences, are all part of her toolkit now. "I know how to do all this stuff, from soup to nuts," she says.

Meanwhile, becoming the subject of a hard-hitting documentary about her quest to familiarize Americans with the daily life stories of the Iraqi people can't hurt in raising her professional profile. Dalton is hard at work tweaking the film, but has not yet projected a release date. Visit Tychostup's website at <http://lornatychostup.com> for more info about the film and to follow her blog.

@ Frances Marion Platt