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Injured teacher continues his artistic expression

By Kristen A. Graham
Inquirer Staff Writer

Frank Burd gets nervous in large crowds, and fears going into Center City alone. His youngest child just left for college, and some days, he feels isolated and overwhelmed.

Burd, widely known as a victim of student violence, rarely ventures out of his house without a camera. And pictures, always central to his life, have taken on a new significance.

"Photographs have served as my third hand," Burd said. "I shoot because it feels good. I'm doing this for me."

Tonight, an exhibit of his work opens at the University of the Arts. With *Moments*, the former Germantown High math and photography teacher does not attempt to relive the day of his attack in 2007, when two students broke his neck and left him severely brain-injured, "my 9/11, the moment that changed my life forever."

Instead, he celebrates ordinary things - droplets of rain on his deck; a stranger's beautiful, proud face; a scuffed baseball lying next to a dandelion in a patch of grass.

Flipping through prints this week, Burd pointed to a shot of acrobats in bright costumes caught midleap at a circus.

"I know it's not balanced," he said. "It's not perfect. But I like that. It's a moment."

When his memory fails, as it often does these days, photographs fill gaps.

"Some tell me to let the camera go, to simply sit back and enjoy the moment," Burd said. "It wasn't easy to do it before I was hurt; it's impossible to do it now."

On Feb. 23, 2007, Burd was injured after he confiscated a student's iPod in algebra class. The student followed him into the hallway and pushed him twice; he fell toward a ninth grader lingering in the hallway, who punched him in the face three times and caused him to fall face down. Both teens pleaded guilty to aggravated-assault charges in Juvenile Court and were sentenced to detention facilities.

His first camera

Burd, 62, remembers nothing of the attack. But when he was in the hospital, his son brought him his camera, and he began using it to remind him of the many friends and former students who visited.

He carried it to the sentencing of Donte Boykin and James Footman, whom he embraced even as he expressed anger for the way they endangered his life.

And he still shoots pictures, nearly every day. It feels natural.

He got hooked when he was 8 and an uncle gave him a pink-and-black plastic camera and a roll of film. For years, he shot and developed his own film, and for a time, he even had a business - the Philadelphia Post Card Co. - based on his art.

He taught photography as well as math at Germantown High and covered school events like sports, proms, and concerts. He delighted students by snapping informal portraits of them in the hallway, then making prints for them. He ran the school yearbook, working on it even from his hospital room.

Teaching the mechanics of photography was never his chief aim.

"I wanted to teach them to see," he said.

Burd, who has not worked since the injury - he collects worker's compensation payments, and opted not to sue his attackers - is still coping with the fallout from that day.

He is no longer in pain but remains on medication and regularly sees a neuropsychologist and cognitive therapist.

What he misses

He has short-term memory problems, an inability to multitask, difficulty concentrating.

Listening to music is difficult, as is reading and watching television. Seeing foreign films, once a favorite pastime, is nearly impossible - he can no longer simultaneously read subtitles and concentrate on the action.

Burd misses teaching, especially the camaraderie of his teacher friends. He misses the chance to affect students' lives.

"It's an important part of my life that I'm missing," he said. "I still feel like I have to make a difference in this world."

Gregarious and sharp still, with an expressive, craggy face and a thatch of dark hair going gray, Burd still struggles with loss - not just his memory and his career, but also his best friend, local sportscaster Gary Papa, who died of cancer this year. He also misses the youngest of his four children, who recently started college in New York.

But he has outlets, his photos, and now writing. He started working on a long-form version of his attack and the aftermath when he was in the hospital.

He still directs plays, as he did at Germantown High and various theater companies before the attack. It's his 11th year leading the school play at Cheltenham High School, renowned for its strong arts performances.

"When people see me, they see an animated me, and then I go home and collapse," he said. Rehearsals are tough, he said - two hours a day, three days a week.

"In the first hour, I'm fine, I'm good, but in the second hour, I have trouble focusing," he said. "Sometimes I might fall asleep for a minute or two."

For a time, he paid careful attention to the Philadelphia School District. But after Paul Vallas - who visited him often in the hospital and rehab facility, late at night and on weekends, talking about education and the world - left the district, he stopped. He occasionally visits Germantown High but feels disconnected now that he no longer knows any of the students.

Overall, the number of assaults against teachers has dropped since Burd's attack, from 948 that year to 738 last school year. In the year after the attack, the rate of assaults per 1,000 teachers also went down, from 88 assaults per 1,000 teachers in 2006-07 to 81 the next year. Data for last school year were not available.

The district has said more serious consequences for students is the reason for a drop in violence district-wide. For years, officials did not expel a single student, even those who struck Burd.

That policy was reversed last school year.

From time to time, Burd thinks of Boykin and Footman. He doesn't wish them evil, he said. He's curious about their futures.

"I'm really just hoping that they straighten their lives out, that they have wonderful lives," Burd said. "I hope that they can put it behind them, but never forget. I hope that it makes them more compassionate people."