



Ernesto Bazan

A 'Soulful Journey' in a Family Photo Album

By James Estrin Oct. 18, 2017 [Comment](#)

[Ernesto Bazan](#) was teaching a workshop in Brazil in 2013 when he received a call that his father, a surgeon and professor of medicine, had died in Sicily. He rushed home to Palermo, arriving just in time for the viewing, a powerful, if painful moment. Afterward, the body was cremated.

As dark smoke drifted from the funeral home's chimney into the overcast sky, Mr. Bazan took what he called "the last portrait" of his father — making permanent a moment that underscored the fleeting nature of human existence.

That photograph became the cornerstone of his new book, "Before You Grow Up," a family album he created for his twin 19-year-old sons, Stefano and Pietro, in which elegant photographs are mixed with drawings, letters, his mother's journal entries, memorabilia and notebook pages.



A page from Ernesto Bazan's book "Before You Grow Up." Ernesto Bazan

"I made this book as a legacy for my sons, a visual testament that they can carry with them, and share with the people that they love," he said, "and always love each other as my wife and I have been teaching them to do."

The book echoes Mr. Bazan's roles as a son; a husband to his wife, Sissy; and a father. Designed with Kevin Sweeney, it captures the joys and sorrows of 21st-century family life.

Mr. Bazan grew up in Palermo with the expectation that he would follow in his father's footsteps and become a doctor. He started taking "average" pictures as a teenager, he recalled, and when he was 17 a voice came to him in a dream, whispering, "You've got to be a photographer."

After two years arguing with his father over his career choice, he left for New York City to study photography and soon after began working internationally. He first traveled to Cuba in 1992 and was struck by the generosity of Cubans.

"I felt a very powerful connection with them," he said. "Like I belonged to that place in another life."

On a return trip three years later, Mr. Bazan and his friend and printer Mike Levin stumbled upon a scene that seemed out of a 1940s Italian movie, he recalled, as he watched "three beautiful young girls dancing in the streets of Havana." Mr. Bazan started dancing with a 70-year-old woman while his friend chatted up other, younger, women. When the music ended, Mr. Bazan locked eyes with one of them, Sissy.

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A look back at Ernesto Bazan's previous work covered on Lens.

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They married three years later. Shortly after, they had twins.



Family photograph. Camagüey, Cuba. 1999. Ernesto Bazan

Mr. Bazan worked as an accredited photographer in Havana for an Italian sports newspaper and documented his new home in images infused with the rhythms of Cuba. He reveled in family life and photographed his wife and sons incessantly. He started teaching photo workshops, where his students became part of his extended family, too.

But nothing is ever straightforward in Cuba. When the authorities suspected that the workshops were really journalism classes in disguise, he was forced to stop. The decision was more than he could bear, so he relocated to Veracruz, Mexico, in 2006.

"I had to flee Cuba to continue teaching my workshop and to continue to be who I am," he said.

But his sojourn was fruitful: He has published three books of his Cuban photographs — "Bazan: Cuba," "Al Campo" and "Isla" — and moved to New Jersey in order to fulfill his sons' desire to finish high school in the United States.



Sissy kissing Pietro in Havana, 2002. Ernesto Bazan

For seven years he struggled to make a book that would be his legacy to his sons, whom he had "photographed from the womb," he said. It was, at times, a difficult and even painful process.

"This book has brought many tears in my eyes in the making," Mr. Bazan, 58, said. "It's a family album that also deals with sickness, sadness, mourning and death, but with an uplifting and positive look at the future, particularly the one of my children, who are beginning their new soulful journey into their adult part of life."

“I hope my sons remember me as a decent father that was there for them at all times,” he said, “like my father and mother have been for me.”

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