

# Palaima: Pair hope 31,000 images will help spur social change

*Tom Palaima, Regular Contributor*

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It is easy to feel powerless about changing the world we live in.

On one day recently, there were news reports that members of Mexico's Zetas drug cartel were arrested for massacring 27 farm workers and their relatives; in southern Afghanistan, 10 laborers were killed and 28 were wounded by a roadside bomb detonated as they were being driven to a roadwork project; and more deaths from bombs were reported in Pakistan and Iraq.

Who can make sense of senseless murders? It is no surprise that we retreat into our own little worlds and do nothing.

Commercial photographer Diego Huerta and information specialist Daniela Gutierrez have been doing something. UT psychology professor Ricardo Ainslie, who is now finishing a book on the drug wars in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, and his wife, Daphny Ainslie, a psychologist at the Central Texas Veterans Health Care System, opened their home so we could hear Huerta and Gutierrez describe their project, 31K Portraits for Peace ([www.31kproject.com](http://www.31kproject.com)).

What is special about Gutierrez and Huerta is that they are not special. They were not political or social activists, and still do not identify themselves that way. They read reports of big problems in Mexico: hostility against indigenous peoples; the devastation of Hurricane Alex in Monterrey, Nuevo León, a year ago; and 31,000 lives lost in drug-related violence as of last January.

The 31K project and the two projects that led into it use the talents they have to do good for others and to make ordinary people aware of what good they can do.

Huerta showed me an advertising photograph he had taken of a beautiful woman eating a hamburger and said, "I know how to make images that move people to want to do things, even eat a hamburger."

He decided to take photographs of 31,000 ordinary Mexicans in their offices, streets and houses, on beaches and in parks. He and Gutierrez bring a single dove of peace made of folded paper for them to hold. It is called La Huesteca, after the mountain that Huerta remembers from growing up in Monterrey.

Hearing about the project and seeing the portraits on the Internet, individuals and whole families have traveled long distances to be photographed holding La Huesteca. Some have come in memory of lost friends, neighbors, family members; others just to do something that says good people stand against the drug violence. In Oaxaca, one woman holding the dove commented on how much it weighs, how many lives and prayers for peace it embodies.

The Facebook site for 31K Portraits for Peace now has more than 5,000 fans. Comments come in from around the world every day. Single national doves are circulating with photographers in the United Kingdom, Spain and France

Huerta's first photographic project, "El Pueblo de las Nubes" ("Town of Clouds") was shown at the Emma S. Barrientos Mexican American Cultural Center in summer 2010. It raised awareness of the culture of the indigenous Huicholes and the need to preserve their traditional ceremonies and protect their ritual spaces. He and Gutierrez lived with these people in May 2009.

In July 2010, Diego went into Monterrey the day after Hurricane Alex struck. The advertising agency MenosUnoCeroUno facilitated the purchase of 75 of his photographs of men, women and children putting their lives back together. Carta Blanca in turn sold them, raising \$243,000 for Un Techo Para Mi País ("A Roof for My Country") México, an organization like our Habitat for the Humanity. They built 100 houses with the funds.

Huerta and Gutierrez have devoted themselves full-time to the 31K project since early May. They have almost 11,000 photographs now. Eleven thousand human beings have stood up with them and said we are all responsible for stopping the violence. We want to do something good today. They inspire others to do the same.

In public areas in Ciudad Juárez, Huerta and Gutierrez have put up posters of the portraits with the caption "la paz comienza creyendo," "peace starts with believing." An exhibition is planned for Austin's Mexic-Arte Museum in January.

Eleven years ago, Malcolm Gladwell explained in his book "The Tipping Point" how social change is dependent upon three kinds of "people with a particular and rare set of social gifts": people who bring people together, people who spread new ideas and people who persuade others to undertake action.

Sometimes it only takes two people to make us start believing.

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