



# #porchportraits

*Pandemic, Protest and Peace in a Small American City*

Photography by  
Jan Regan  
with an essay by  
Chris Lavin

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The American front porch is a space in between—in between our homes and the outside world; in between our family and the community.

Prior to World War II, the front porch was one of the great institutions of small-town American life. Geneva, New York is a small city filled with porches. Most of the homes are older, many of them well-kept residences built over 100 years ago. Porches functioned as an extra room, with sidewalks just beyond them, inviting strolls and stops among neighbors for the latest local news.

By the 1950s and 60s, though, technology was leading to social change. More cars made streets noisier and less welcoming to pedestrians. Air conditioning was cooling houses down. Television lured families inside.

Slowly, Americans retreated to the interior. Where there was new housing this trend was evident in what became “family rooms,” or in back yards—where patios and decks, for more privacy and less spontaneity, became standard fare.

In 2020, the year of the COVID-19 Pandemic, with “lockdowns” and “social distancing,” Americans rediscovered the virtues of the front porch and re-occupied it. Genevans were ready for it. From their front porches they reached out to each other to connect.

From the confines of my own home, I sought connection as well. I found it, reaching out with my camera to the front porches of Geneva, my adopted hometown—a small city where small town life seems still preserved. Beginning in late March, as Geneva faced a state-mandated shutdown, I ventured out daily, beginning with friends, but meeting strangers as well. I photographed families already gathered and others willing to come outside and meet me. I came equipped with a camera, a monopod, and a long enough lens to ensure I couldn’t possibly get too close.

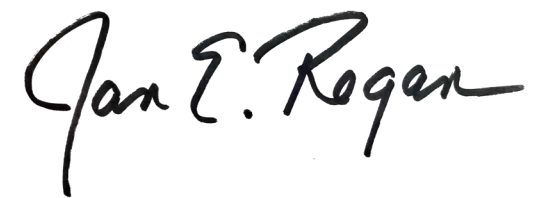
Whatever dynamic there may be between the subject of a portrait and the camera, the pandemic added a different dimension. I was a new face, a new person there at the front porch, entering the intimacy brought on by days of

isolation. There was a desire to capture a rediscovered closeness or to repress a tension that seemed inevitable behind long-closed doors. In this brave new world of masks and keeping our distance, there was even a sense of risk and potential danger in the very act of photography.

Midway through our shutdown, the killing of George Floyd at the hands of police in faraway Minneapolis brought a revitalization of Black Lives Matter and a counter of Back the Blue to Geneva. In the midst of the pandemic it was a strange juxtaposition that brought people *off* their porches, peacefully, into the streets. And it was more tension. I turned my camera to the rallies and marches, proud of my diverse community for the peaceful confrontation of volatile issues that had long been simmering even in this small city.

We are accustomed here, in this seemingly isolated place, to looking elsewhere for the big news stories. But now, we could gauge the consequences of what was happening in the world by looking out our own front doors.

These photographs, taken during the tumultuous months of March through October 2020, stand as a tribute to the resilience of my community during this time of pandemic and social upheaval. They became a daily Instagram post—#porchportraits. My subjects lifted my spirits every day.



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Book Design: Christine Mitchell

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978-1-7367272-0-1

Circle Press

Geneva, New York



The concept of “lockdown” was a novelty, and my first subjects came out smiling and playful. The term “social distancing” was new, and we spoke it a bit tongue-in-cheek.

Mara O’Laughlin and Joanne Goff return from a winter in Key West to their shutdown town. Their adult children called them every day to be sure they were staying home.







These were “come as you are” photo sessions. Some families emerged in pajamas in mid-afternoon. For others, conversations from inside spilled onto the porch with them. While it had its downsides, this extra time at home was welcomed by most everyone. We expected it would be brief.

Jackie Augustine, with her children. Two were learning remotely from high school and middle school, while the third returned home from his first semester in law school.





Windsor Wade and Mary Carlo, above, sit on their front porch the day they were scheduled to leave for a trip to Spain to hike the Camino De Santiago. The pilgrimage was their long-planned honeymoon.

At right, Girtrue Dye cares for her three-year-old twin great, great grandchildren, Assiah and Asad, while their mother works.







Joe and Deb Phelps, above. I was too far away to hear the joke.

Left: Pets and babies relish new schedules. The Guard family on their porch in March.





Geneva has some distinctive and well-known porches. Alfredo DeLeon has long used his porch as an open front room, complete with hammock, televisions and refrigerator.





Iranisha Vazquez-Berrios hugs her younger brother, Luis Ortiz. A registered nurse, Iranisha juggles care for her brother and her two children with an hour commute to a Rochester hospital for work. Her routine includes a complete disinfecting of her car and clothing before returning to her family after her shift.