Clear As Black

Alumna uses photography to tell story of albinism

by Jenna Neil

Adriana Monsalve, a 2008 Andrews University photography graduate, has been working on a series of photos titled Clear As Black. The series features people from Puerto Rico who have albinism, a condition that refers to little or no pigment in the eyes, skin or hair. Her work was recently featured in the Washington Post in an article by Nicole Crowder.

“Through the series I hope to dispel misconceptions of people with albinism by highlighting the fact that they are people before albinos,” she says.

Monsalve came up with the concept for Clear As Black after living in Puerto Rico for three months. Puerto Rico has the highest prevalence of albinism and Hermansy-Pudlak Syndrome (HPS) in the world. HPS is a rare disease that occurs most commonly in albinos in a variety of ways. HPS 1 and HPS 3 are the most common in the population of Puerto Rico and can include platelet dysfunction and fibrotic lung disease.

“I came up with ‘Clear as Black’ because I felt it represented exactly what it was that I had been
seeing for three months in Puerto Rico,” Monsalve explained in the Washington Post article: “White people that are black, and black people that are white and all the visual representations of that.”

Monsalve was hesitant at first to do the series because it forced her to tackle her own story of being classified based on looks. She is fair skinned but Hispanic and Black.

“By looking at me you will not know what I am,” she said in the article. “I am white, but I am black. Slowly the personal side of this story kept gnawing at me more and more, and before I knew it this project was about me. Through this series, I discovered who I am genetically.”

Monsalve wants society to break away from the narrative of seeing people with albinism as “other” and highlight the fact that they are fundamentally people.

“They are people with a condition called albinism and they live interesting lives just like you and me,” she says, “full of layers and puberty, racism and prejudice, romance and break-ups, academic achievements and religious views, family drama and everything else that makes them a whole person.”

She began her project in June of 2013 and it’s still ongoing.

“At some point it will be finished,” she commented. “But I feel like there are so many layers and this is just the surface. The way I work is long-term and in-depth. I don’t feel that it will reach fruition for another ten years or so.”

Monsalve recommends supporting organizations that work with albinos and encourages everyone to consider doing so. She plans on working on other projects while continuing to work on Clear As Black.

To read the Washington Post article, click here. To view more of Adriana’s work, visit adrianastories.com or follow her on Twitter @fotofolife or Instagram @amfoto.