

# The RIT Big Shot: Part Two

by William DuBois, Dawn Tower DuBois, Willie Osterman,  
Scott Saldinger and Michael Peres

*On December 4th, 1987 the Biomedical Photographic Communications program at RIT produced the first Big Shot, which was attended by a mere 37 people. It was an exciting event for those in attendance and since that time, Big Shot projects have been consecutively produced for 27 years. In the more than a quarter century since that snowy December night, Big Shot has become a signature event for the University. Its mission — to foster teambuilding and problem solving skills using simple equipment — has become a cornerstone for each succeeding adventure. Conceived as a nighttime community photographic event, it has remained true to those objectives, while growing in stature and complexity. The photographs in the portfolio now number twenty-eight. Part two of this article shares personal reflections and anecdotes of the organizers which chronicle the trials and tribulations of Big Shot.*

## Overview

The RIT Big Shot project is organized and coordinated by four individuals, and its longevity and survival depend on the generosity and good will of countless partners big and small. It would be impossible to produce the project without this army of dedicated and creative individuals. During its 28-year history, each of the coordinators has experienced a wide range of emotions, and has done extensive preparation preceding each upcoming project. The following comments from each of the coordinators share some of those experiences. There are also comments from Scott Saldinger, an alumnus who helped to create two projects in Texas.

## It Happens in a Flash

by Bill DuBois

Creating a Big Shot is a long and complex process that takes months, if not years, to complete. A better opportunity might



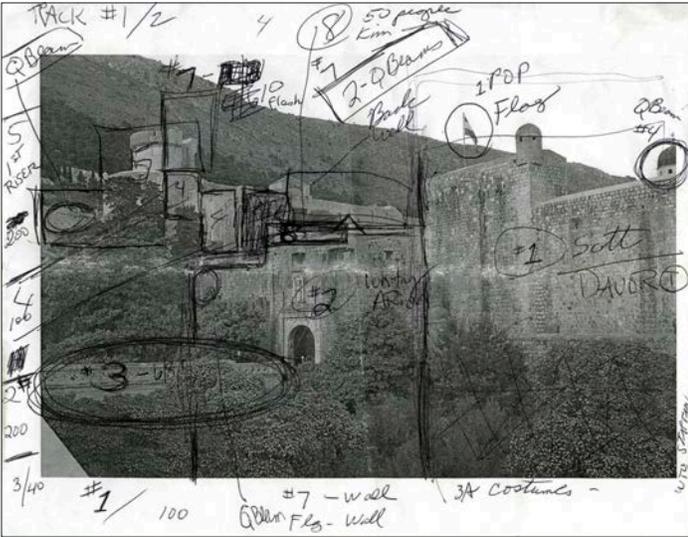
**Figure 1.** The December 1987 issue of the Highland Hospital newsletter featured the Big Shot story following the successful completion of Big Shot No 1. L to R, Michael Peres, Bill DuBois and members of the Hospital staff.

not exist to help students learn a variety of complex and simple concepts, and also work as a team. "The Big Shot project started 'innocently' as a way to teach electronic flash photography in a more interesting way", Bill often says. The project is still achieving that outcome, but goes much further than that (Figure 1).

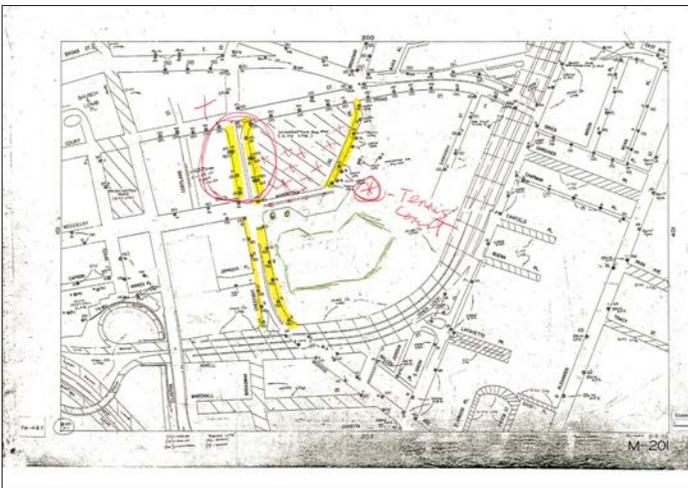
For me, Big Shot has been about the education experience it provides. All the participants have the opportunity to learn something new. When Dawn, Michael, Willie and I get suggestions for the next project, we begin brainstorming the complexity, timing and other planning components. All its components must provide opportunities to learn new things. If the next subject does not provide such an opportunity, it quickly falls off our list.

When you attend one of these events, and hopefully you will if you haven't had the opportunity, you will see many people that want to assist the Big Shot team with the lighting. They are all smiling, laughing and wondering what their job will be during the event. They prepare by wearing dark clothing, and bring along some type of portable lighting equipment. Most of these 'flashers' as they were initially referred to, don't know in advance

Editors note: This is a companion piece to The RIT Big Shot: Part One, which appeared in the last issue of this Journal, JBC Volume 38, No.1 Also see the Showcase in this issue, which features additional images from the RIT Big Shot project.



**Figure 2.** Each project requires careful planning and decisions must be made as to where to locate participants. Pictured here are the plans for the Pile Gate photograph made in Dubrovnik Croatia in April, 2007.



**Figure 3.** A street map showing the area surrounding the Strong Museum of Play in Rochester New York. 'X marks the spot,' showing placement of some of the 'flashers'.

what their particular lighting assignment will be, or how to best utilize their light when they arrive (Figure 2) and (Figure 3).

Planning for the Big Shot includes preparing students, faculty and friends to work in groups, and assisting them in solving the lighting challenges. This is one of the first educational opportunities for those in attendance. Individuals who may have never been a leader of a team now take on that role; their qualification for the job might be based on the outcome of having been a participant on a prior project. The reader can begin to see now how Big Shot increases in scope and complexity from year to year. A first-year student with a new flash participates in his/her first year, and then in the second that student becomes a leader on the night of the event. In the student's third and fourth



**Figure 4.** Nathan Pallace, an RIT student at the time, prepares to help illuminate the Smithsonian Museum photograph September 2009.

years, he or she might take on bigger and more complex roles. Watching this growth is a major payoff for any teacher/professor.

Observing the participants at a Big Shot event has become more important to me over the years. Sometimes families attend together, and some of these families include kids and grandparents. Everyone arrives with a light in hand, and wanders about waiting for their assignment. They soon receive directions to join others, and head out to evaluate their assignment. They assume the responsibility to light their sections as instructed, and do so with great enthusiasm (Figure 4).

A team leader gathers the group together and will say something like: "Aim the light high on the building and not at the ground" or "you should always keep your light moving back and forth across the building. If you don't, your light will create a bright spot and not be even". They now understand the concept of 'painting with light'. Just as you use a spray can of paint to change the color of an old rocking chair, you must keep the spray moving to spread the paint and color evenly. The sparkle in their eyes comes alive.

As the start of the event draws closer, the communications between lighting teams and those operating the cameras is tested. Of course, to everyone involved it sounds like Michael, Dawn, Willie and I are just yelling at each other, but it is really our way of letting all the teams know we are getting ready to start. Anticipation builds, and the crowd takes on a certain singularity; everyone is waiting for the signal to start "lighting 'er up".

Breaking the silence, "LENS OPEN" is shouted from the camera platform, and the site erupts in flashes, and the panning of flashlights across the subject. My age allows me to reflect upon the first time I was in a discothèque. The illumination is scattered all over the site, and some areas draw our attention more than others. It might be that there are too many people in that one spot, or one light is too bright. We realize this as the first exposure is displayed on the computer screen, just seconds after the camera lens is closed (Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** A common description of a Big Shot is organized chaos. People are moving all around, and lights are being aimed and discharged all across the scene. In this photograph, some of that chaos is recorded during nearly two - minute exposure.

Dawn and I have often operated the cameras, and we have the distinct pleasure of seeing the first exposure. In the early years, this first exposure was in the form of Polaroid prints when we used film. Now, of course, we use a computer. We have only seconds to let Michael and Willie know if teams need to modify their approach, or maybe move a handful of flashers to another location in the scene. After those decisions are made, we make three more exposures to capture the 'perfect image'.

Within a few minutes, all the planning and the event itself is over. The participants have done their job, and there are cheers of success.

## Reflections on Big Shot

### by Dawn Tower-DuBois

When I graduated from RIT's School of Photographic Arts & Sciences in 1983, I never in my wildest dreams envisioned that four years later Michael Peres, Bill DuBois and I would create a photographic project that would endure for so many years. 'The project' drafted me as a member of the Big Shot team, and exactly how I became the first and only camera operator on our first shoot has faded from my memory, but it has been a fantastic journey.

Each and every project has a story. I love the memory of being sworn in as an 'Alamo Ranger' and repeating upon command, "so help me Texas!" (Figure 6); or climbing out of a second story, bathroom window in a beautiful old mansion situated on East Avenue in Rochester, NY so that I could stand on a porch roof to photograph the Rochester Science Museum.

As a photography professor, I teach concepts of innovation and problem solving. This rings so true when working on Big Shot projects. I begin to get really excited, and the adrenaline begins to flow about two hours before the photograph is made. This can be either awesome or nerve-racking.

I find that the same questions run through my mind a day before the event. Will we have enough people to light the scene in the manner we have carefully planned for? Will the weather cooperate? And last, but certainly not least, will the exposures be



**Figure 6.** RIT Big Shot coordinators being sworn in as Alamo Rangers in March, 2000.

correct? I also wonder whether we will end up with a dynamic image. In the pre-digital years, preparation was a critical factor, and a major source of stress. Will the images from two 4 x 5 cameras be in sharp focus? Will the wind move the scaffolding, and blur the image? Are Bill and I moving too much on the platform? For me, in the early years, it was total fear during each evening of a shoot. A bit of anxiety is still there even after 28 projects, and that keeps me focused, and feeling alive.

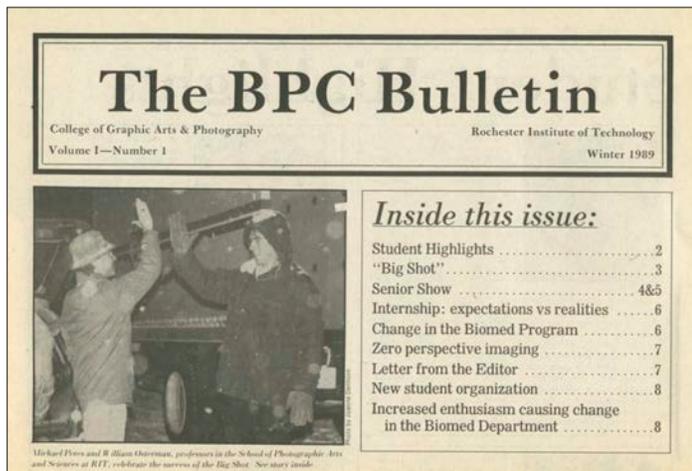
Now that we have converted to digital technology, I wonder did I make certain that the computers are fully charged? Did I bring the right cables? Do we have charged batteries in the Nikon cameras? By now the reader is beginning to see a pattern of constant worry on my part. It passes very quickly after the photograph has been made, and we know that we have once again done something special with the fantastic support from so many people.

The first year featured Highland Hospital, and the temperature was well below freezing. The first test photograph was made using Polaroid Type 55 film, and the developer pod was frozen. We had no test image to view to confirm our exposure time was correct. I was forever immortalized by a local TV story from the evening yelling to Bill and Michael, "We got no exposure". Not the way Bob Dylan would have written that line.

I will also always remember the year we photographed the Ontario County Courthouse. About 30 minutes before the project was to go, Bill and I were standing on scaffolding six feet up in the air with three 4 x 5 cameras. A reporter asked us if we had expected such a large crowd, and we both responded at the same time. Bill said, "Yes I had expected a large turn-out" and I responded, "No, I had not expected such a big crowd". We rarely



**Figure 7.** Bill DuBois and Willie Osterman evaluate the Q beam that was used for the first time to reach the dome of the Court House for Big Shot No 18 in December, 1998.



**Figure 8.** Michael Peres and Willie Osterman celebrate the success of Big Shot No 2 featuring the George Eastman House in December, 1988.

think the same way, but that's what makes the team good. We are always thinking of ways that can improve our chances of success (Figure 7).

In the early days of the project, Bill, Michael and I raced home to process the film and produced 8" x 10" black and white prints. I must admit, a few beers and pizza appeared somewhere in that flurry of deadline-driven moments, which made it both fun and memorable. I never realized how handy a hair dryer could be when needing to dry black and white film in a hurry, so we could get prints made ASAP. For a few years we actually drove damp black and white prints to many Rochester television stations, and dried them using the heaters in our cars.

Again, I don't want you to think that all I do is worry. A daughter of a colleague, named Nina, had attended several of the local Big Shots with her mother and she had picked up a great deal of experience from watching. She was in attendance at the RIT Big Shot of the Memorial Art Gallery, and was quite intrigued

by the fact that we were shooting digitally using computers along with a traditional 4 x 5 camera loaded with Polaroid film. After the event, as Bill and I were packing up the photography equipment, I turned around to see a small crowd where Nina held the black and white Polaroid in her hand. She was 'holding court' confidently explaining to the group how it had all worked. This was one of those moments when I became intimately aware of what it means for people to attend Big Shots.

## The Constructed Decisive Moment

by Willie Osterman

I have always been amazed with the process of a photographic image capturing a slice of time; a moment preserved forever. I am further intrigued when a timed exposure is made collecting light over time, and how the image 'compresses' that time into one still image. For years I have been working with this concept in my creative work by setting up cameras and making exposures for hours or even days, allowing the light to record itself onto my film.

Behind the camera, the photographer documents more than what is actually seen. Robert Frank, noted photographer and film director, once said: "The image is a product of the photographer's creativity almost more than the subject being photographed." I also believe that photography is a performance art. We work in solitude and share it with an audience when a print is displayed on a wall, or on the Internet, or reproduced in a magazine. The RIT Big Shot shares all of these things. It's a slice of life. It's a timed exposure; it establishes new rules on how to make an image, and creating the image is only successful with community involvement.

The first Big Shot I attended took place at the George Eastman House in 1988 (Figure 8). I was impressed with the 'choreography' that took place in order to make the picture. As time went on, I became more and more fascinated as the images became more and more complex. After the exposure, the event is over, yet the excitement remains as we wait to see the image. In the early years, after the exposure was made, Michael Peres and Bill DuBois would hurry off to a darkroom, while the rest of us waited for them to emerge, always thrilled with the good densities on that film. Over the years the consistency of the results have been quite impressive. All of that complex planning continues to work! And now we have instant gratification with digital technology. I still find it hard to believe that with all the preparation, time and money involved, the ultimate result is a short-timed exposure that's over in a matter of minutes.

I've been involved with fifteen Big Shots, and have fond memories of them all. Two of these I will mention here. The first is the Intrepid Air, Sea and Space Museum. The idea of photographing this huge floating city seemed quite daunting initially. The ship is enormous, and surrounded on three sides by water. At that time, I was not an official member of the Big Shot team, and was not involved in the planning or site visits. These visits are used to select the ideal viewpoint, find a place to set



**Figure 9.** This view of Big Shot No 19 made in October, 1999 has never before been published. The bow was illuminated by 50 high school students from Cranford NJ using single-use cameras equipped with flashes. Willie Osterman operated this camera on the West Side Highway.

the cameras and determine the number of participants needed. After seeing the daylight pre-shot, I honestly thought these folks were nuts! I could understand wanting to illuminate a building like the George Eastman House, but this? The idea of dealing with complexity has become a philosophy of the team. Dreaming big (and a bit crazy), and planning every single detail in the creation and execution of this decisive moment is key to the success of the event.

For the Intrepid I was asked to set up a secondary view camera, and create a different point of view of the ship; my position was in front of the ship, on the ground level. Next to me were 50 high school students who had been given Kodak single-use cameras. They were asked to flash the front of this massive structure using these simple cameras. Their cries of joy and clapping hands were as exciting to me as the final image itself. It made me realize that these events bring together people of many ages, and from different locations and backgrounds for a common purpose: to ‘perform’ in public with their lights – out of view of the camera – but in full view of the subject they are illuminating (Figure 9).

In 2007, twelve photography students and I spent a semester at RIT’s sister campus, The American College of Management Technology in Dubrovnik, Croatia. One of the purposes of this trip was to be on-site for the planning of the upcoming April 2007 Big Shot. The subject was the Pile Gate, and the wall surrounding the old town. It made for a fabulous composition, though very complex to plan because of culture and language barriers. My job was to communicate to my Croatian colleagues what the Big Shot was and how one was created. With the assistance of my students, some who had been involved in other Big Shots, we had a daunting task ahead of us. I had never been this involved with the planning of a project, and being in another country complicated things a lot. Many were skeptical of the idea, and



**Figure 10.** Willie Osterman and 12 RIT photography students spent 10 weeks in Croatia studying, and helped produce the 2007 Big Shot featuring the Pile Gate in April, 2007.

asked why would we want to do this as the wall is already illuminated at night? Soon we established a dedicated team from the college and community at large; we met weekly to iron out the many complicated details (Figure 10).

In advance of the RIT team’s arrival, we had established a general plan as to how we were going to create the image. Once everyone was in Dubrovnik, we refined the plan and discussed how to position the participants. The night the image was made was full of excitement, tempered by some degree of nervousness. As the curtain of night fell and sunset was upon us, a big crowd had arrived. Once in position, the lights went out and the ‘Constructed Decisive Moment’ began.

## Big Shots No. 16 & No. 28

by Scott Saldinger

When did ‘Big Shot magic!’, as coordinator Michael Peres refers to the project, begin for me? Big Shot and I go back to 1988 to Big Shot No. 2, The George Eastman House. I was two blocks away and walked over to see what was happening there. I didn’t know at that time I would be videotaping No. 4 two years later for inclusion in my senior thesis video feature — ‘A year in the life of RIT’. Then, while working at NBC Channel 10 as a news photographer, I was assigned to cover Big Shot No. 12 at Rochester’s Browns Race Historic District. During all these events I never actually participated in the project.

I moved to San Antonio, Texas and lost touch with the project until I saw Big Shot No.14, The Intrepid Air, Sea & Space Museum featured in the RIT alumni magazine. A few months later, then RIT President Al Simone was in Austin, Texas for an alumni reception. I asked about his experiences with Big Shot. Dr. Simone lit up while telling his story. You could sense his pride and that he knew there were bigger things to come for Big Shot. I asked Dr. Simone, “How about a Big Shot of the Alamo?”

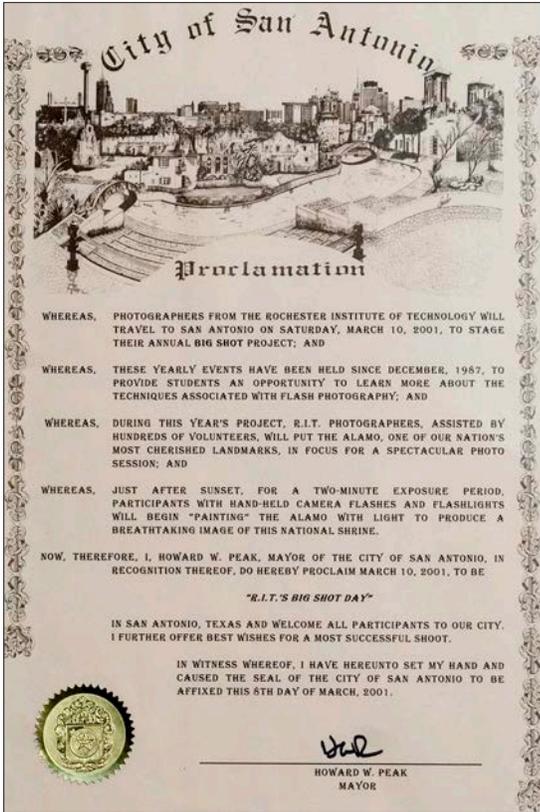


Figure 11. A copy of the San Antonio proclamation heralding March 10, 2001 Big Shot Day.

He acknowledged my question as being a good idea, and then changed the subject. I had no idea I'd receive a letter from him thanking me for being an involved alumnus, and what a good idea a Big Shot at the Alamo might be. The same day the letter arrived, my office phone rang and the voice on the other end said "This is Michael Peres from RIT. I'm with the Big Shot. I don't think we have met and but I've been asked by the President to evaluate the idea of making a Big Shot featuring the Alamo. What have you gotten us into?"

That call began my Big Shot adventure as a participant. Convincing the Alamo and the Daughters of the Republic of Texas to let us make this photograph was our first challenge. Once that obstacle was resolved, all of the pieces fell into place. During the event, the Big Shot team became deputized as Alamo Rangers, the City of San Antonio proclaimed March 11th '2001 RIT Alamo Big Shot Day', and for the first time ever, all of the lights in Alamo Plaza were intentionally shut down. 1,100 people from South Texas (and from around the country) came together to illuminate the very first Big Shot outside of New York State (Figure 11) and (Figure 12).

Michael and I kept in touch over the next eight years. I always wanted to find something else to challenge the team. In 2006 I moved to Dallas, Texas and found what I was looking for. Jerry Jones was planning to build a new stadium for the Dallas Cowboys. The existing stadium was old, and beyond repair. I



Figure 12. The front page of the Sunday March 11, 2001 San Antonio Express News featured Big Shot.

thought a Big Shot print sitting on every seat when fans arrived for the very first game at the new stadium would make a great memento of the former Stadium. Unfortunately, I was not able to connect with the Cowboys before the old stadium was imploded.

In June of 2011, I was attending a meeting where Jerry Jones was the guest speaker. After his remarks, I made my way to the end of the greeting line. I had just one question. "Mr. Jones, would you be interested in allowing the Rochester Institute of Technology to create a photograph that involves bringing the community together using nothing but hand-held lights to create a once-in-a-lifetime image that will be admired around the world?" His answer: Yes! I gave him my number, but he never called. I wasn't going to let silence derail this opportunity. I began reaching out to my business network and to connect with Charlotte Jones Anderson, Dallas Cowboys Executive Vice President and Chief Brand Officer.

On a subsequent trip to Rochester I laid out my vision to Michael. The Big Shot team had already photographed the King's Palace in Sweden, and now I was going to secure Mr. Jones's 'palace' as the next Big Shot. The plan would be to photograph the largest 'machine' in the world and a beautiful glass work of art in its own right.

We assembled photographs, news clippings, and videos, which were delivered to Valley Ranch to hopefully re-start the conversation. Nothing moves quickly during football season, especially something like an idea for a group to come down from



**Figure 13.** Musician Phill Collins accepts a copy of Big Shot No 16 for his collection from Scott Saldinger. Collins owns the largest private collection of Alamo memorabilia and artifacts.

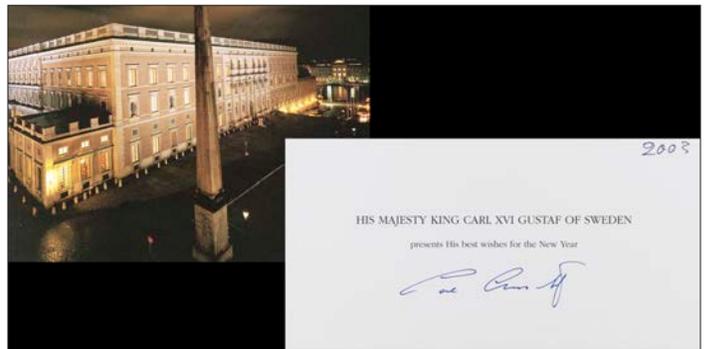


**Figure 15.** The three Big Shot coordinators were photographed in front of the King's palace with Lennart Nilsson, Staffan Larsson and Jakob Forsell October, 2003.



**Figure 14.** The Big Shot team portrait taken inside Cowboys Stadium June, 2012. L – R Ron Goldberg, Bill DuBois, Dawn Tower DuBois, Michael Peres, Scott Saldinger, and Willie Osterman.

a Western New York college for an event that takes 25 minutes start to finish. In January 2012, the Cowboys made contact, and asked what the Big Shot was all about, and why RIT wanted to travel so far to make this picture? A few weeks later we had a conference call with the Stadium staff. We sparked their interest, and they agreed to take the proposal to the Jones Family. It took a while, but on Friday April 13<sup>th</sup> 2012 we received an email informing us that Big Shot No. 28 of Cowboys Stadium would be possible. That was the first hurdle of what would then be a hurry-up-and-wait process in which it took nine months to confirm the date. This left only four months to develop a plan, raise funds, and get the word out to the people of North Texas. The biggest Big Shot project ever attempted would ultimately have one of the shortest planning periods.



**Figure 16.** King Carl Gustaf XVI of Sweden was so enamored with the Big Shot photograph, that it was incorporated into his Christmas card for 2003.

The team's first site visit was in June 2012. There's no way to comprehend the size of the stadium until you stand next to it. It's not an exaggeration to say there really is nothing else like it in the world. Planning continued at a fevered pace, and the number of logistics problems mounted. How do you illuminate a structure that is 75% curved glass? Where will the funds come from to produce the event? Will the community embrace the project, and come out rain or shine to ensure we have the volume of light needed? Lists grew, assignments became many, and the number of people working on the project grew daily. Michael coordinated things from campus, and I did the legwork in the DFW metro area.

As with all Big Shots, we just never knew if it would all come together until the actual moment. Despite cold temperatures and a day-long rain, more than 2,400 people came from all over the world to help flash the stadium. Together we all pulled off the biggest Big Shot to date in the project's long history. Michael and I viewed the image on an iPad that was shared with the camera

crew perched 40 feet in the air. I knew we had captured that 'Big Shot Magic' Michael proudly boasts about. The plan worked, and in a way that very few events could. It brought together a community to create a photograph requiring everyone to work as a team, and producing an image that will stand the test of time (Figure 13).

My Big Shot experience has been incredible. For the team to embrace and support my ideas for Big Shots is an honor. I was an outsider who had the opportunity to become an honorary member of the group. Together we have expanded on the idea, which started out as a simple lighting assignment more than 25 years ago. I am so proud to have helped take the Big Shot to the national stage for all to see the amazing work that RIT does. From the Alamo to Cowboys Stadium, I've pushed the team beyond their comfort zone, and all I can wonder is, will they answer the phone the next time I call? (Figure 14).

## Conclusion

The RIT Big Shot has become a project whose longevity and success no one could have imagined. It continues to evolve, and create new and interesting photographs. We are always surprised by our great fortunes — a 1999 CNN feature, a 2011 PBS documentary and a Christmas card by the King of Sweden (Figure 15 ) and (Figure 16).

What a ride! Bill DuBois and Michael Peres conceived the initial idea in May 1987, and every year brings new opportunities. It is somewhat sad to share that in March 2013, Bill DuBois resigned his official capacity as one of the Big Shot coordinators. Similarly, Dawn Tower DuBois will finish her official role February 2014 at Big Shot No. 29. The Dubois' vast experiences as architectural photographers have played important roles in making Big Shots work. Their leadership will be missed, but we are excited about the new and exciting projects on the horizon.

Visit <http://www.rit.edu/bigshot>

## Authors

**William DuBois** has been photographing news events, portraits, sports, landscapes, fine arts projects and architecture for more than 40 years. His love of teaching, however, grounded him in the classroom at the RIT in 1974. Bill has been teaching students at all levels within the School of Photographic Arts & Sciences since that time. While graduate students are more sophisticated, freshmen, according to Bill, are the most fun to teach. DuBois graduated from Ohio University with a BFA in photography. After his military service, he worked in the News and Photography Services at Bowling Green State University. Bill completed a BGSU Masters degree in Career and Technology Education and moved to Rochester, New York. In May of 2011, he retired from RIT. [wwdpqh@rit.edu](mailto:wwdpqh@rit.edu)

**Dawn Tower DuBois** holds a BS in Biomedical Photographic Communications, and an MS in Printing Technology from RIT. An architectural photographer, she founded Images and Ideas, a full-service photography firm, in 1986. Dawn served as a faculty member for RIT's National Technical Institute for the Deaf from 1990 until her retirement in June of 2012. In this role she provided support and instruction to deaf students enrolled in the School of Photographic Arts and Sciences. In addition, Dawn has led classes for the School of Photographic Arts and Sciences to Cuba and Oaxaca, Mexico. She will be leading workshops to Cuba for RIT alumni in the future. [dtdnvs@ntid.rit.edu](mailto:dtdnvs@ntid.rit.edu)

**Willie Osterman** is a Professor of Photography at RIT, where he has been teaching and doing research since 1984. He received his BFA in photography from Ohio University and MFA from the University of Oregon. After graduation, he became a visiting assistant professor at the University of Oregon. His teaching experience includes the Ansel Adams Workshops and other workshops in Italy, France, Austria and Croatia. As former Curator of Photography at the University of Oregon Museum of Art, he received two grants from the National Endowment for the Arts. His publication *Déjà View: A Cultural Re-Photographic Survey of Bologna, Italy* was printed two times. In 2009 he received a Fulbright Scholars Award to teach in Zagreb, Croatia. His work appears in numerous collections. [wtopph@rit.edu](mailto:wtopph@rit.edu)

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