



# KARI RENE HALL

## AN UNLIKELY HERO

Story by Kalo Fainu

+ A staff photographer for The *Los Angeles Times* for eighteen years, Kari Rene Hall left to pursue documentary and feature film projects. ‘Henry: An Unlikely Hero’ won the Canon Photo Essayist Award at the National Press Photographers Association Pictures of the Year contest.

This story has had several lives: as a multimedia presentation ‘Hope at Heartbreak Motel’ on MSNBC.com, and as ‘How Henry Got His Gumption’ in the *Los Angeles Times* Sunday magazine.

Hall is also the author and photographer of ‘Beyond the Killing Fields’, a photo documentary on Cambodians struggling to survive in a refugee camp, which was published by Aperture in 1992 with a foreword by The Dalai Lama.

While covering a police raid in 1996, photographer Kari Rene Hall first discovered the Ha’ Penny Inn, a run down, seedy and often violent motel that was home to drug dealers, prostitutes and sadly, families. One of its cockroach-infested rooms was occupied by Henry Guiliante, his girlfriend Michelle Harig and their four children.

Henry and Michelle met in 1985 at an AA meeting. At that time Henry was thirty-three and Michelle was fifteen. Michelle had run away from home, having been subjected to physical and sexual abuse from the age of nine, and had turned to alcohol and drugs. Henry had his own demons to deal with. Returning embittered from a tour of duty in Vietnam he struggled with alcoholism, and lived the life of an outlaw biker. ‘There’s a lot of things that I’ve done that will definitely have to stay between me and God,’ he said.

Henry and Michelle battle to raise their young family at the Ha’ Penny, which is populated by prostitutes, dealers and meth labs, with police raids a part of everyday life. Michelle does most of the work, trying to keep the family together. She tries to provide a good education for their children and even becomes a PTA vice president. Henry does not make enough money with his on/off work as an auto mechanic, and the family rely on government assistance.

All this changes when Michelle is charged with welfare fraud for not revealing that she was living with Henry. She is ordered to pay twenty-five thousand dollars in restitution and is sentenced to six months in jail. This is the first time Michelle has been away from the children and Henry is forced to take on all the responsibilities that Michelle had previously covered.


Kari spent four years documenting the lives of Henry and his young family, and admits that trying to ‘make a difference’ drives her documentary work. Her photoessay takes viewers on a journey that show one family battling to get ahead when the odds are stacked against them, yet out of their desperate situation emerges a partner, a father and a man who is clearly undergoing a difficult yet remarkable transformation. She states:

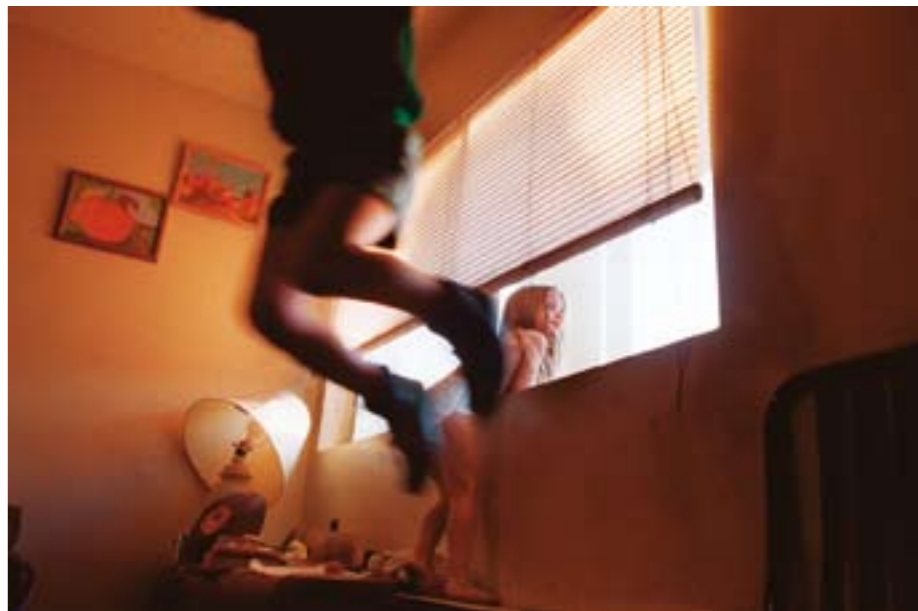
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...I want to explore stories behind the headlines. Stories that might not otherwise be told. I often start with the question, how could this happen? For me, the best way to explore a subject is up close and very personal. I want to know the subjects, feel their conflicts, hear their voices. I want to understand.

For example, millions of people live in poverty in America. But how does one tell such an enormous story? For me, look small. Find that one person, one family or one situation that reveals the bigger story. Through the complex, nuanced truth of one family, readers are offered a glimpse of what it means to be poor, one man’s struggle to pull his family from the quicksand of the Sinking Class.

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While undertaking the project, Kari advised Henry and Michelle that the story might not necessarily be a positive one, to which Henry responded, ‘Yeah, I know. But it will be a true story, and maybe people will understand how hard life is.’ 



A seedy motel room near Disneyland, 'The Happiest Place on Earth', is home to Henry, Michelle and their four children. Henry is a master of avoiding work and housekeeping chores.



Michelle pleads guilty to welfare fraud for failing to reveal that Henry lives with her. She is sentenced to six months in jail and \$25,000 in restitution.



Henry finally kicks into gear and begins to clean up. Cailee pitches in to help her father. She prepares her own cereal for breakfast and washes the bowl in the sink afterwards.



Michelle calls several times each day from jail. Henry gets emotional once the children have left the room. After \$700 worth of collect calls, the phone service is cut off.



Henry joins a room full of mothers snapping pictures of the first day of kindergarten. Michelle was PTA vice president and school volunteer.

Michelle is released from jail. Complaining that she is tired of always being a mom, Michelle abandons her family. They had looked forward to being a family again.



After several month's absence, Michelle begins to re-appear. She comes over for Thanksgiving, but only as a visitor, as she makes very clear by watching Cailee vacuum.



Henry rallies other motel residents to take action and force management to make repairs. Appointed president of the tenant's association, Henry holds a meeting in his room. He declares that 'management can no longer step on the little people.' After Henry takes the motel to court and loses, he is forced to pack up his home of six years.

