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Challenging the Status Quo
Through the Lens of a Camera

Illinois Holocaust Museum’s Forthcoming Special Exhibition
Activists and Icons: The Photographs of Steve Schapiro
On View October 7, 2018 - October 27, 2019

“For me, there’s no difference between photographing a celebrity and a migrant worker. You’re always looking for a picture with emotion, design, and information.”

- Steve Schapiro

Renowned Chicago-based photographer Steve Schapiro has given history a human face throughout his career, contributing images to Life, Look, Newsweek, Rolling Stone, Vanity Fair, and numerous other publications.

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Schapiro’s work is celebrated in *Activists and Icons: The Photographs of Steve Schapiro*, a special exhibition on view from October 7, 2018, through October 27, 2019, at Illinois Holocaust Museum. Viewers will experience the breadth of the civil rights movement, as well as vivid portraits of celebrities who challenged - and changed - our cultural norms.

The exhibition’s 46 large-format photographs tell the story of seminal moments in history from the March on Washington (1963) to Robert Kennedy’s presidential campaign (1968). Schapiro’s documentary approach comprises emotional portraits of heroes ranging from Rosa Parks to a sanitation striker, and from Joan Baez to Rita Schwerner, widow of Michael Schwerner, one of the three activists killed by the Ku Klux Klan near Philadelphia, Mississippi in 1964. Other images suggest how martyrs become icons. In a haunting triptych of images, the subject is missing, as Schapiro’s camera surveys Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Memphis motel room the day after King’s 1968 assassination.

As he documented the tumult of the 1960s, Schapiro spent days and weeks with many of his subjects, some of whom — Robert Kennedy, James Baldwin, and David Bowie — became his close friends. These personal relationships add depth to the historic moments he captured. Guest curator and civil rights historian Erik S. Gellman observes, “Schapiro documented the civil rights movement with care and intimacy, unlike others who arrived at a pivotal moment and left once they got the shot.” Museum CEO Susan Abrams adds, “To some, Steve Schapiro is as much an icon as those he photographed, and we are fortunate to have him as a partner for this compelling exhibition. Visitors will be transported into the lives of the principal protagonists of the 20th century.”

Schapiro picked up a camera at age nine, focusing on his working-class neighbors in the Bronx. In college, he planned to be a writer but soon realized that storytelling with a camera could be just as powerful as storytelling with a typewriter. Early on, he studied with W. Eugene Smith, who revolutionized the photographic essay with a humanistic approach to his subjects.

Cassius Clay (Muhammad Ali), Louisville, Kentucky, 1963
This ethos of intimacy informs all of Schapiro’s images, starting with his earliest work as a photojournalist in 1961. His prolific output also includes portraits of the most influential celebrities of our time, ranging from Muhammad Ali to David Bowie, from Truman Capote to Barbra Streisand – all of whom appear in the exhibition. Schapiro has always had an undeniable penchant for conveying something unexpected, even in those we think we know well.

Activists and Icons: The Photographs of Steve Schapiro exemplifies Illinois Holocaust Museum’s call to action: “Take History to Heart. Take a Stand for Humanity.” Schapiro’s subjects have done that, as has the photographer, by using his powerful imagery to tell stories through the human face.

Illinois Holocaust Museum, founded by Holocaust survivors, is dedicated to giving voice to human experience. Its permanent Karkomi Holocaust Exhibition is populated with personal narratives - in videos, photographs, objects, and documents - of those who lived the experience. The courage of their truth-telling fuels the Museum’s mission. In its active schedule of special exhibitions, including Activists and Icons, the Museum illuminates other moments of crisis worldwide and calls upon its visitors to become Upstanders by suggesting ways to take action.


Activists and Icons: The Photographs of Steve Schapiro
October 7, 2018 – October 27, 2019
Public Opening: Sunday, October 7, 2 p.m.—Steve Schapiro in conversation with guest curator Erik Gellman
Illinois Holocaust Museum, 9603 Woods Dr., Skokie, IL 60077
Open: Daily, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Thursdays, until 8 p.m.
Exhibition free with Museum admission
Museum admission: $15.00 for adults, $10.00 for seniors (65+), $8.00 for students (12-22), and $6.00 for children (5-11). www.ilholocaustmuseum.org | 847.967.4800

The Selma March, 1965

Warhol and Entourage (from left: Henry Geldzahler, Edie Sedgwick, Foo Foo Smith, Andy Warhol, and Gerard Malanga) New York, New York, 1965