

DEVELOPING HISTORY

Art show examines work of former Fargo photographer and his secret family ties

STORY BY JOHN LAMB / THE FORUM



Mike Lien

If you go

► **What:** Reception for "Finding Michael," photo exhibit of rediscovered and restored photographs by Mike Lien

► **When:** 1 to 4 p.m. today, with a 2 p.m. gallery talk by Bob Gaffaney

► **Where:** Rourke Art Museum, 521 Main Ave., Moorhead

► **Tickets:** Admission is free for members, \$5 for the general public, and \$2 for students. (218) 236-8861.

When Mike Lien died in 1977, the 40-year-old photojournalist left behind a career's worth of images and a lifelong mystery.

Both are being unveiled this weekend at the Rourke Art Museum in Moorhead.

Lien's skilled work with a camera is nothing new to those who saw his pictures as a student, then as a photographer for The Forum in the 1960s and later as a White House shooter for The New York Times.

"I kind of idolized Mike growing up," says Robert C. "Bob" Gaffaney. "He was 10 years older, and I admired his work in The Forum, an aspiring photographer myself in those days."

What Gaffaney didn't realize until only a few years ago was that Lien was not only a great photographer, but he was also Gaffaney's uncle.

Family portraits

In 1919, Gaffaney's grandfather James Edward "J.E." started what would become Gaffaney's Office Specialties Company in Fargo. In 1922, 17-year-old June Aggerholm joined the company as a bookkeeper, secretary and treasurer of the organization and stayed on until the business was sold in the mid-1970s.

Aggerholm took two leaves in the mid-1930s; supposedly to go to Hot Springs, Ark., for arthritis treatment. In reality, she gave birth to a daughter, Barbara, in '35 and a son, Michael, in '36.

Her absence didn't go unnoticed by office workers and mechanics who gossiped about a possible relationship between Aggerholm and her married boss and noted the occasional visits by a young Mike.

Mike was raised in Fargo by the Liens, but June remained his legal guardian, thus blocking the Liens from

making Mike one of the family.

Even without strong family support, he did well in school and took an interest in photography before joining the Air National Guard and getting his degree in economics and political science from the University of Wisconsin Madison.

Lien returned to Fargo, eventually got a job as a photographer at The Forum and then on to The New York Times in 1968, where he shot both politics and sports. He left the Times in 1975 and in December of '78 was in a car accident that left him in a coma for two-and-a-half months until doctors took him off life support.

By all accounts, Lien never knew he had a full sister, but before Barbara died last May, her daughter Angie Plum decided to find out who her grandmother was. She traced the family back to June Aggerholm in Fargo, and by questioning her grandmother's friends and former co-workers, she discovered the Gaffaneys' secret.

Coming into focus

"To find out all these years later there was a family connection was really a shock," says Bob Gaffaney, a Software developer in Algonquin, Ill., northwest of Chicago. While the revelation was a surprise to most of his generation, Gaffaney said that his uncle, J.E. Jr., knew June Aggerholm's role not only in the business, but also in the family and made sure she was taken care of even after the company was sold in the '70s. J.E. Jr. even flew back from Arizona to attend Aggerholm's funeral in '97.

While the family didn't know about Lien's relationship, Lien was all too aware that J.E. Gaffaney was his father.

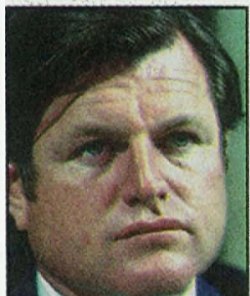
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► **Photos from top to bottom:** The late Mike Lien at work, photo by Stanley Tretick. **Fog:** Lien's work for The New York Times took him around the world, including to London in December 1972, for this shot. **Snow:** Nephew Bob Gaffaney says Lien's timing was "amazing," as it was in this snowy image. **Boat:** Lien had a love for photos of boats, like this one from Annapolis in 1973. In 1977, Lien's ashes were scattered in Chesapeake Bay, where he once worked.



FAMOUS FACES

Throughout his career as a photojournalist, Mike Lien took photos of several icons and celebrities. Here are a few of his familiar subjects:



Ted Kennedy

The iconic politician died last year, but his family's legacy continues on in American history.



Ed Muskie

Maine's Muskie ran for president in 1972 and served as senator and secretary of state for President Jimmy Carter.



John Connally

Treasury secretary for President Richard Nixon, Connally was in the car when John F. Kennedy was shot.



George Wallace

The former Alabama governor was a key figure in Southern race issues, opposing desegregation.



Anna Chennault

A native of China, Chennault became a key figure in Asian relations with the United States.

LIEN: Felt rejected by his true family

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Lien trusted few people with the truth of his lineage, but one of those he did discuss his family with was Joan Raider, whom he met while they both were involved in the Fargo-Moorhead Community Theatre in '67.

"It was a cruel truth for him to learn that both his birth parents, though unmarried to each other, worked together in a successful business his father owned, just blocks away from his foster family's home," Raider wrote for the Rourke's exhibition book "Finding Mike."

"Even more disturbing was learning that his birth father had four older sons by his lawful wife and that they all enjoyed a prominent position and privileged lifestyle in the Fargo community."

Raider recalls Lien once telling her that he looked more like J.E. Sr., than the other Gaffaneys did, all of which left him with "deep-seated pain and anguish" and "feelings of perennial rejection and resentment" throughout his life.

"I felt bad because here was somebody who had half an identity," Bob Gaffaney says of Lien.

Gaffaney's views are echoed through the family, says his cousin Michele Vannote of West Fargo.

"All of us value family so much, so we're saddened children had to grow up without a shared legacy," she says, her voice getting emotional. "We're just sad that we had to hear about it so late."

While Raider also writes that J.E. Sr. never acknowledged Lien as his son, Bob Gaffaney said that wasn't so, that Lien was financially taken care of by his father, including his college education.

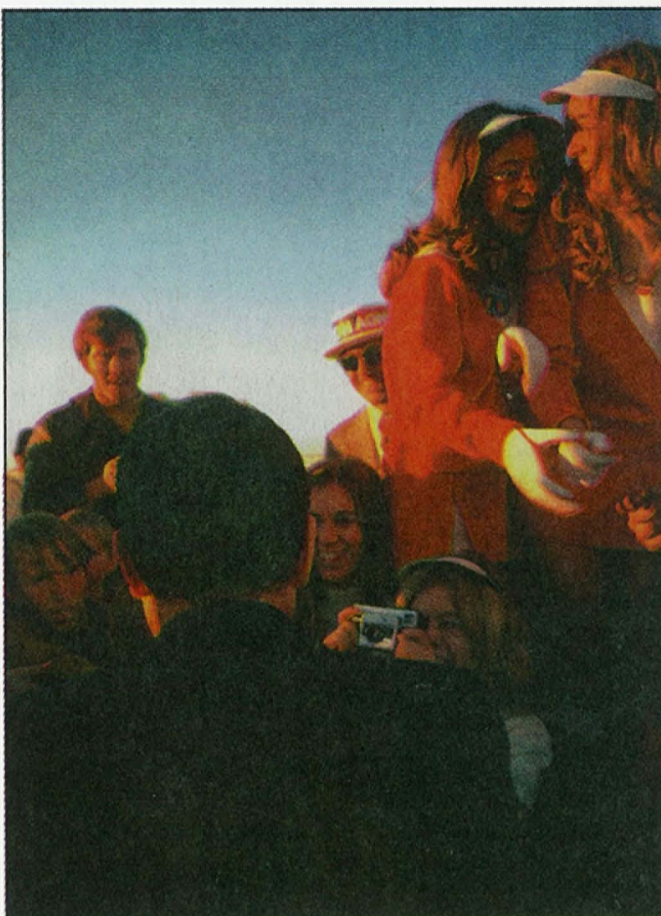
"You have to remember that this was the '30s, '40s and '50s, and things like this weren't talked about," Bob Gaffaney says when asked if he was mad at J.E. Sr.

Vannote's father, Paul, was the last of J.E. Sr.'s children before dying of cancer in June 2007. She says when he was told that year that he had a half brother, the only thing he would say was "I'm not surprised."

Seeing through his uncle's eyes

Bob Gaffaney found constructive ways to deal with the news that Lien was his uncle. He started a Web site, www.findingmike.com, to gather and share pictures and recollections of the photographer as well as tracing out the roots of his extended family.

He also collected Lien's negatives from the late photographer's colleague, including about 3,000 color slides. Gaffaney then spent nearly three months organizing these, then scanning in about 130 of them and preparing them for the Rourke show.



Mike Lien / Special to The Forum

Photos such as this one of President Richard Nixon campaigning in 1972 helped Lien win two first-place awards from the White House Photographers Association.

"I feel honored to have spent the last year looking through his eyes and seeing what he saw," Gaffaney says.

A photographer for 40-some years, Gaffaney says he learned from Lien as he worked with the dead photographer's slides.

"His sense of timing was just amazing. He seemed to have such a feel for the right instant."

Gaffaney refers to a picture of then-controversial Alabama Gov. George Wallace, a segregationist.

"That tells the story of the dark places in that man," Gaffaney says. "(Lien) had an excellent sense of timing, composition, he just had it all. ... Besides all the technical skills, he had quite a vision."

James O'Rourke, director of the Rourke Art Museum, calls Lien's second post-mortem show there "more of his great work."

O'Rourke and Mark Strand of the mass communications department at Minnesota State University Moorhead put together the show as they did the collection of black-and-white prints, "Mike Lien: Photographer," in 2005.

"He didn't take mediocre photos, no matter what he shot," says O'Rourke.

Conflicted emotions

Still, Gaffaney has some hesitation about the whole "Finding Mike" project, not so much about the work itself, but rather focusing on the artist.

"I have to say I'm a little bit conflicted. Mike was such a private person, and here his life is a matter of public record," he says. "I feel that my motive in this is to bring attention to the man and his work, and not for any other reason. So I

hope he wouldn't be mad at me for spilling the beans."

There was also some concern over how his relatives might feel about such a public airing of a family history.

Vannote says she questioned the story at first, wanting documented proof, like a birth certificate. But as Bob, whom she calls Robbie, filled her in with the story, she came to accept Lien as a member of the family.

"I'm not looking at a birth certificate, but I'm looking at a picture of a man who looks identical to my cousin Robbie," she says.

"They're very excited about it now. At first, like I was, there was a little bit of shock and maybe just a little bit of feeling that maybe it would be a little bit more convenient if the story wasn't brought out," Gaffaney says. "But they're fully on board with the project now."

About 20 or so Gaffaney cousins – as well as some of Lien's old friends – are in Fargo-Moorhead for today's reception, getting an introduction not only to Lien's work, but also to the newest members of the family – Lien and his niece Angie Plum, who discovered the lost connections.

"There's two parts to 'Finding Michael.' There's the finding part and the Michael part. I hope to put the emphasis on Mike and his work," Gaffaney says. "I think the most important thing I can say to the group gathered on Sunday is just, 'Welcome home, Mike. We're just proud to have you as part of our family.'"

Inforum searchword: art

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