

Hiller photographs the world's exotic places

By Gwen Tuxbury, *Chestnut Hill Local*

December 8, 2005

When Chestnut Hill resident Jeff Alexander, 39, received his first camera as a high school graduation gift from his parents in the '80s, he never imagined he'd be traveling the world shooting compelling geographical photographs and sharing them with strangers years later. For his first exhibit, he is currently showing a collection of his favorite photos, called *People, Places* at Rx restaurant, 4443 Spruce St. in University City, 215-222-9590. Currently, the show has an indefinite end date, but it will at least be going on through December.

"I could tell you stories behind almost all of these photographs," Alexander said. "They connected me to people in these places that I wouldn't have connected with otherwise." The photos allow a sort of voyeuristic view to a very intimate moment in time.

In fact, most of the time Alexander holds the camera by his waist, so as not to be seen, and quickly snaps a shot without the subject's knowledge. In doing so, he truly captures a slice of time so much more truthful than if it were posed. The majority of his photos have human subjects. "I was always drawn to people," he said. "The face changes hundreds of times in a minute, and I have this natural attraction to capturing expressions, of showing something unique about a person in a photograph . . . it's very difficult to do."

Alexander had always been a very visual person, even as a child, though he began looking at photography as a serious focus in his life during his college days. He attended New York University for his first year, and the city streets provided rich material. Pushing himself out of his comfort zone, he was able to change the ordinary point-and-shoot method into something more sophisticated, such as experimenting with flash techniques, time exposures and multiple exposures.

Traveling was something his father encouraged early on; it was really his inspiration since he liked photography as well, so he would go with his father across Europe for a month or so, immersing himself in exotic surroundings. During high school, he took his first trip abroad with his father. Blasting through the UK on a sort of multi-country tour, some of the places visited included London, Edinburgh and Paris. "I was probably 17, young and impressionable, eating it up like a sponge. That definitely left a mark," he said.

Most astounding is the fact that he has never received any formal training in photography. "I'm 85 percent self-taught, and the rest of it comes from friends," he said. Jeff has never really considered photography as a career, but as a serious pastime, "one that I'm passionate about and am constantly trying to improve upon." Almost as a natural instinct, Alexander views the world as if he were always behind a lens. "It's funny," he said, "but when I'm in a place, I will often see a scene in color or black and white, as the camera would see it . . . I get a gut feeling for what the situation calls for."

Along with Europe, Alexander has taken photos in Cuba, Thailand, Cambodia and elsewhere in Southeast Asia. "Thailand has a particular significance to me. The people: the gentleness of the people and the inner beauty of them really had an effect on me. Everywhere I go gives me a different perspective, but I think the people of Thailand I've

met really have had the most profound effect.” Cuba was where he took what he considers the most significant photos, however. “I crossed a line in Cuba ... I saw the progress of all my years summed up in those images.”

He has taken photos of different places in the United States as well, but prefers traveling abroad. A different country is exotic, unlike the everyday scenery that gets taken for granted. “But if you look hard enough, you’ll find new angles and come to a new perspective,” he said. “It all gives you a deeper understanding of a place, I think.”

In the future, Alexander hopes to have more photo exhibits. He already has another show lined up for the summer at Infusion, a coffee shop in Mt. Airy. Alexander is looking at South America as his potential next trip, but if he can get away for a long weekend anywhere, he will. No matter where he goes, though, “I always have the same thing in tow,” he said. “I always have a travel companion in the camera.”