Sabbatical Leave Report

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In mid-August, 2006, I moved to Terlingua Ghost Town in the Chihuahuan desert for my sabbatical leave where I lived in an old miner's shack that had no air conditioning or heating. This was fine until mid-October when the nighttime temperatures dropped to the low 40’s and high 30’s. The shack had electricity, running water, a screened-in kitchen, and an outside bathroom with a flushing toilet and shower. Most of the residents have electricity and running water, but a flushing toilet was a luxury that most do not have. Since my shack had an outdoor kitchen, I cooked over an open fire with the aid of a Dutch oven. Coffee, eggs, bacon, beans, tortillas and an occasional pineapple upside down cake were common fare, especially the beans and tortillas. I returned to Plano in mid-December, 2006.

The focus of my sabbatical leave was to complete the New Learning Context course (semester away—12 semester hours) for my Master of Fine Arts degree and to learn more about digital photography. My intent for the semester away program was to focus on photographing inside Big Bend National Park. After I arrived in Terlingua, I discovered that the landscape outside the National Park fit my needs better than the landscape in the Park. Through contacts I made during my first few weeks in Terlingua, I was given access to private ranches that are unavailable to the general public.
Every evening I went to the infamous Ghost Town Porch (a place where the locals gather in the evening to discuss the day’s events). I would take part in the discussions where I obtained additional permissions and learned about other places to photograph that had special meaning for the local residents.

When I was not out photographing the landscape, I immersed myself in the community. I served on the Rural Mass Transit Committee which one might find somewhat amusing. What does a Ghost Town need with Mass Transit? Brewster County where the Terlingua Ghost Town is located is the poorest county in Texas. The Feds were trying to determine whether there was a need for a fifteen place van to serve the area. The answer was “yes.” A van was needed to transport the “locals” to Alpine or Presidio 100 miles away to purchase groceries and to keep doctors appointments. If a ride cannot be found, residents are likely to be seen hiking State Roads 118 or 170. A woman in need of a mammogram must travel to the Odessa/Midland area 300 miles down the road, to have the screening done. In my spare time, I helped others in the desert community by volunteering my labor. I helped stucco a shack and helped replace the floor of the church and made repairs in the community center bathroom.

I also traveled to Alpine and Marfa, where I visited local art galleries, talked with local artists, and photographers, and visited the famous Chianti Foundation. I discovered that most photographers in the area were not embracing digital
photography because of the initial expense of the equipment. Blair Pittman, a retired National Geographic photographer, who lives south of Terlingua is having his negatives scanned and burned to gold DVD’s, so he can archive his works. James Evans of Marathon purchased a negative scanner and Epson printer to scan his negatives and print the digital files. James indicated that he is not ready to make the change because digital equipment is changing to fast.

My sabbatical leave has allowed me to learn more about digital photography and digital printing and to capture the “RAW” images for my Master of Fine Arts Thesis Exhibit. May 12th I will graduate with a Master of Fine Arts degree from Texas A&M-Commerce. None of this would have been possible without the generous sabbatical leave from Collin County Community College. I am now better prepared to teach our students landscape photography, digital photography, and digital printing and to oversee our photography labs.