

Zander Masser

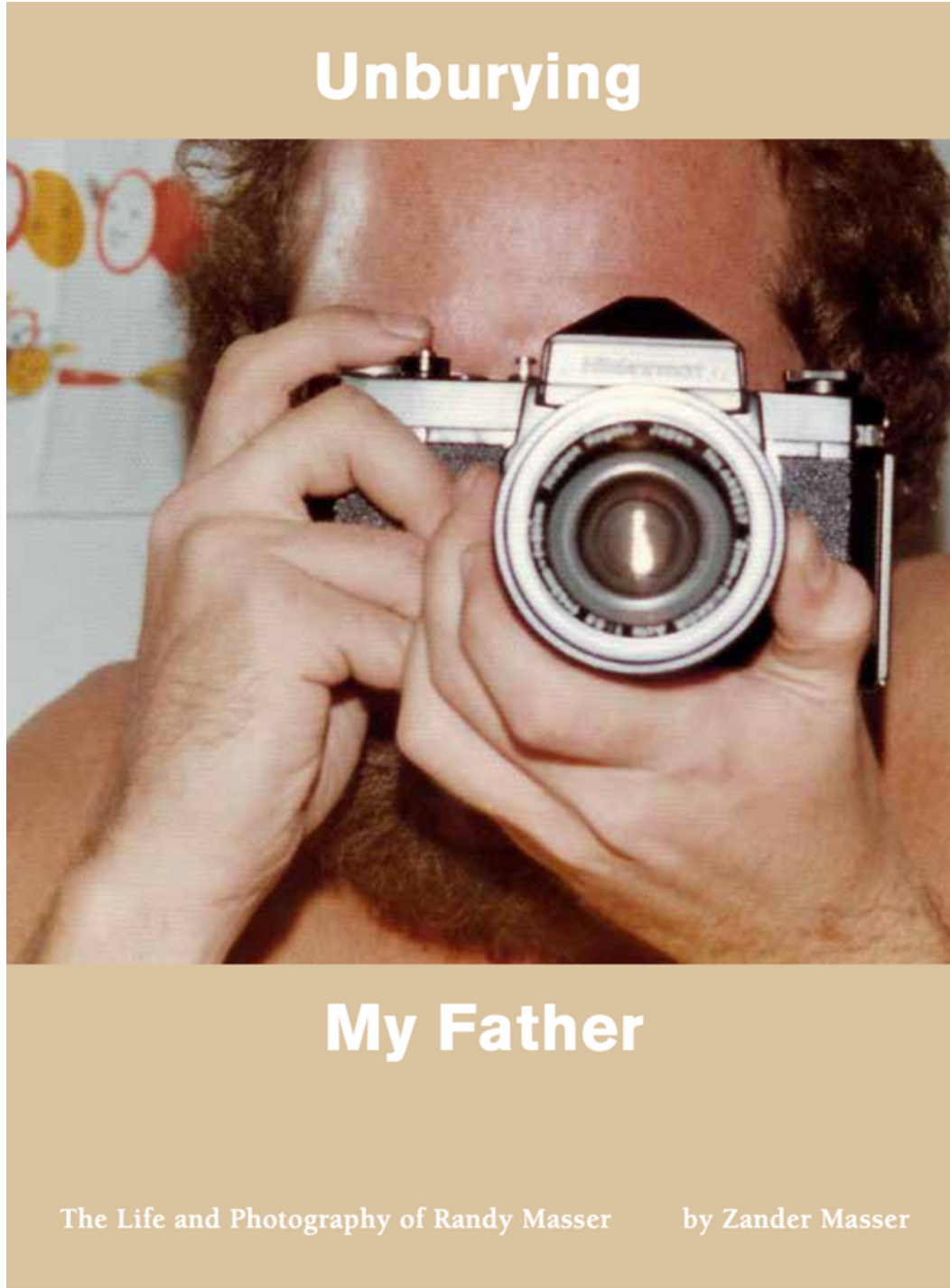


Reflections on grief from a son, father, observer and creator.

Zander Masser is an occupational therapist, husband, father, musician, and author of the narrative photography book, *Unburying My Father*. Zander's father, Randy, lived with hemophilia and contracted HIV from tainted blood products in the 1980s. He died in 2000 from AIDS-related illnesses. Twenty years later, Zander unburied ten thousand slides from Randy's career as a professional photographer, which prompted him to dig deeper into his father's life. What started as a photography project evolved into a transformative exploration of living with, and healing from, grief. See the following pages to learn more about Zander's book, talk, workshop and photo exhibit. Zander is available for in-person and virtual events.

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The book



Unburying My Father is an act of love, a work of art, and a catalyst for deep conversations and human connection. The book was funded by a successful Kickstarter campaign and released on June 12, 2022.

Book Synopsis:

My dad, Randy Masser, was born with a severe form of a bleeding disorder called hemophilia B. In the early 1980s he contracted HIV from tainted blood products used to treat the disease. On January 6, 2000, at 52 years old, he died from AIDS. I was 14 when he died.

My dad was a professional photographer. He shot exclusively with film, and he developed, printed, and edited his photos by hand. He photographed the Alvin Ailey Dance Company between 1975-1979 where he captured timeless photos of dance legends. He captured 25 years of life on the streets of New York City, and he had a gift for artfully capturing every-day scenes of life. He never went anywhere without a camera around his neck.

Several years after my dad's death, I went back into the basement to see what he left behind. I found 10,000 slides. I scanned every one of them and created a physical and digital archive of my dad's entire collection. As I viewed a world so beautifully captured by my dad's camera lens, I realized how little I actually knew about him, and I wanted to learn more. So I reached out to his family, friends, and colleagues, and asked them to share the stories about him that I had never heard. I had wanted to reconnect with my dad for so long, and I finally found the right way to do it. My dad's unique photography provides a rich visual experience as his life story, told by me along with his friends, family, and colleagues, unfolds. I've unburied my father's history and photography, and I subsequently tell my own story, which has remained buried for far too long.

For the last two decades, not one day has gone by that I have not thought about and missed my dad. I've spoken to very few people about my experience of living in a home with a parent with a chronic condition, an infectious disease, and a terminal illness, and of living through such a traumatic loss. Many people close to me know almost nothing about the most important part of my life story, and that has always been painful. Presenting this book to the world is my most vulnerable act.

In the presence of perpetual hardship, my dad remained a constant, positive force in so many people's lives. His story is one of great resilience. But, only by creating this project have I come to identify the alienating consequences of my dad's exclusive focus on staying positive. He never talked to my family about his sickness or his looming death.

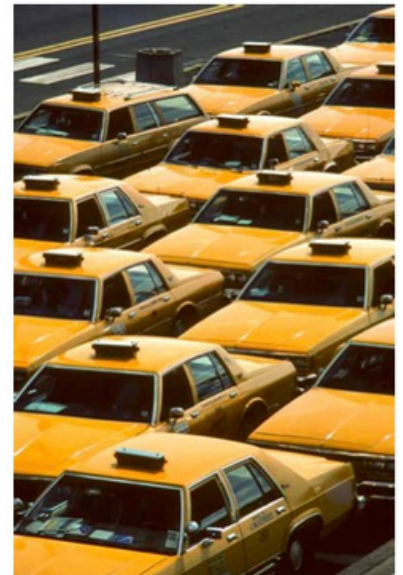
My dad's distinctive, quirky, and beautiful photography captures a deep sense of humanity and is reflective of a man who longed for life. It's hard to think of my dad without picturing a camera around his neck, hearing the sound of the camera's click, and seeing the smile on his face when he knew he got the perfect shot. I love his photos, and I think you will too. I honour my dad's artistic work and I celebrate his life by collaborating with him to make this book a reality.

“I am standing on the shore looking out onto the ocean. It isn't a pristine white sand beach with clear water. It is brown, dark, dirty looking sand and the water dark green. I have a palpable feeling of calmness. It's sunny, I hear the waves crashing and feel the breeze. Out of the corner of my right eye I see a figure approaching. No face or distinguishable features, just a black silhouette of a person running towards me. Before I can turn to see who it is, this person plunges a knife into my chest. I wake up. It's about 3:00 a.m. I go back to sleep, and wake up again at 6:00 a.m. and I hear mom talking in hushed tones in the basement. I knew dad had died. I went downstairs. She was on the phone with my grandparents. She hung up promptly and we embraced. I think now that the feeling of tranquility in my dream was one last gift of peace before I woke up into my new reality, before being on the other side of the great focal point of my life.”

Graham Masser,
my brother



Several people, including my grandparents, told me that they did not know where my dad's interest in photography came from. My dad participated in life as much as he could, but because of his physical limitations, he couldn't fully engage. Akin to having a heightened sense of hearing if you are blind, I think that his observation skills were sharpened by being on the sidelines and watching others move through the world in a way that he was not able to. This translates to the camera lens. I believe that once he picked up a camera, he was naturally skilled at identifying and capturing elements of everyday life in a meaningful and artful way.



“Randy made friends with people the way a lake reflects the sky. It can't help it.”

Stephen Cowan (Stephen C.), my parents' friend and my childhood paediatrician





The talk

Zander's talk is a deep dive into his process of exploring grief through creativity. He shares intimate details of his father's life as a friend, son, parent and photographer, as told by the people who knew him best. Zander discusses the impact that his father's silence surrounding his illness had on him, his trauma around losing one parent, and his struggle to connect with the other. He takes viewers through the intimate processes of collecting, writing and grieving, with the goal of helping others to find ways of sharing their own grief stories. Zander's talk is appropriate for a wide array of audiences, including those in the bleeding disorders community, and those interested in grief, death education, using creative arts to heal, chronic conditions, terminal illness, end-of-life care, mental health, HIV/AIDS, and photography.

The workshop

Drawing on his experience as an occupational therapist and creator, Zander has developed an interactive workshop in which he helps participants reconnect with loved ones they have lost, and experience catharsis through collecting and sharing their stories. Zander breaks down his creative process into ten concrete steps, provides examples of each step from his own work, and guides participants to do the same with their own story. While Zander ultimately created his book, *Unburying My Father*, each workshop participant creates something very different, reflecting their own experience, interests and skills. The workshop can be tailored to be anywhere from a 1.5-hour session to 6 sessions over the course of 6 weeks.

The exhibit

Drawing from *Unburying My Father*, Zander has created a multimedia exhibition that provides viewers a unique visual experience. It combines Randy's original prints, excerpts from the book and family footage spanning five decades. Zander reconstructs the basement that functioned as Randy's photography studio, and where he would sit with family and friends to display his spectacular photos. Randy's original slides are presented using a vintage Kodak slide projector and slide carousels. Hearing the click of the button and the advancing slides brings viewers back to a time before the digital age, when we viewed photos - and lived life - a little more slowly and deliberately.





Events

- April 21, 2021 Episode 65 of Dad Hard With A Podcast: Zander is interviewed on his project in the context of becoming a father. There have been over 2000 streams so far
- April 28, 2021: Zander successfully funds his project via Kickstarter
- October 19, 2021: Zander is a keynote speaker for the Hemophilia Federation of America's (HFA) annual symposium
- November 5 2021: Zander is a featured guest speaker at the bi-annual meeting of the National Hemophilia Program Coordinating Center's Mountain States Regional Network
- November 6, 2021: Zander is a featured panelist for a film series in Rosendale, NY to discuss how the creative mind processes loss
- April 20, 2022: Zander presents a special series at HFA's annual symposium in San Antonio, TX, including a keynote speech, the photography exhibit, and the workshop
- April 29, 2022: Zander is interviewed on the BloodStream Podcast
- May 20, 2022: Zander delivers his talk at the Coalition For Hemophilia B's annual symposium in Orlando, FL
- June 12, 2022: The official book launch at the Chappaqua Public Library with a 6-week long photography exhibit.
- June 18, 2022: Zander delivers his workshop for Reimagine on Father's Day

Testimonials

“Profoundly moving talk with stunning photos.”

“That was amazing and moving and crushing and I am so honoured to have been able to hear your story. You moved me to tears so many times.”

Zander Masser is available for in-person and virtual events.

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