

# Kaplan's "Not As I Pictured"

A new movie documents a filmmaker's own battle with cancer.



"ALL I COULD THINK ABOUT was that I wanted to be alive to see my kids grow up," John Kaplan said.

The Pulitzer Prize-winning photojournalist didn't even think about picking up his camera for the first two months after he learned of the likely cancerous tumor inside his body. Kaplan was diagnosed with lymphoma in June of 2008.

Then one night Kaplan and his wife decided to rent a movie, "I'm Not There," by director Todd Haynes, a film that was inspired by the iconic folk singer Bob Dylan.

"It had incredible intoxicating visuals," Kaplan said. "The movie itself had such atmospheric and rich photography that it must have been seeing that amazing cinematography that somehow subconsciously made me want to take my own picture."

The next morning, "I took my first picture in the bathroom mirror. It opened the process of photography as being cathartic and a stress remover that helped with my fear," said Kaplan. Then he decided that he would use his images in a film.

Learning video production and making a film was something Kaplan didn't initially intend to do during his

sickness. "I started scripting it in my head, as I was going through six months of chemotherapy, not because I was thinking it was great to do this but because it was cathartic to find an escape for the things I was feeling," he said.

Kaplan used a Canon 5DMarkII DSLR and a small Canon HD video camera to make the still images and the video in his film. Many of the images and the video were taken as he held the camera at arm's length during treatment.

And the result was his new film, "Not As I Pictured: A Pulitzer Prize-winning Photographer's Journey through Lymphoma."

A professor at the University of Florida since 1999, Kaplan teaches an international journalism class. And so he edited his film with only a beginner's knowledge of how to use Final Cut Pro.

"The film has been a full-time process and then some," he said. "I'm going to work video into my teaching now. It's important that people get comfortable with all the tools – not just one. I have a love for the narrative story structure, and going from stills to film has been wonderful. It's a natural progression for me."

In general, most photographers tend to keep themselves



**FINDING AN ESCAPE.** While being treated for lymphoma, Kaplan shot both still photographs and video – either hand-held with wide angle lenses or by using remotes. His 55-minute film is comprised of roughly half video and half stills. **Photographs by John Kaplan**



**FACING HIS FEARS.** After watching the movie "I'm Not There" with his wife, Kaplan took the first picture of himself in his bathroom mirror the next day. "It opened the process of photography as being cathartic and a stress remover that helped with my fear," he said.

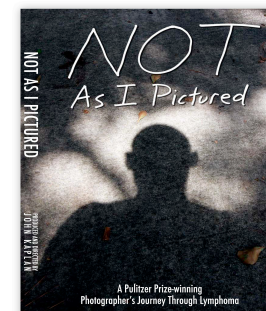
on one side of the camera and not in front of the lens. "For some reason I didn't mind seeing myself looking vulnerable and not looking my best, physically," he said. "I was purely focused on key elements and whether they communicated clearly. When you are the filmmaker, are you taking things for granted that the viewer doesn't understand?" Kaplan says in his film he literally walks the viewer through "a literal story and how to understand it."

The video has music throughout with rights granted by Michael Stipe of R.E.M., Chris Martin of Cold Play, and a mix by both will.i.am and Justin Timberlake.

The film itself is not finessed in the way that many photojournalists would want to see their daily photojournalism, but for Kaplan that wasn't the film's intention.

"It was the elements of remission, recovery, and treatments – I prayed I would be able to tell that story," Kaplan said. "I wanted it to be an hour-long broadcast piece, to be 'in the moment' as a patient – and not 'process' related. The reality of it was that it was raw. My goals were very different than if I wanted to do it as a story; the visuals would have more power. The story itself was my reality."

Kaplan made sure that everything he shot was not technically burdensome for him. His first priority was his well-being, not the photographs. "The most important thing was for the photography to be a part of my healing process," he said.



"The narrative had to be following my own experiences. The last thing you want to worry about is your light and your angle. If I had two cameras and the ability to have a crew and a variety of source material, maybe I would have had the more traditional things like wide shot to tight shot – but in this case, it had to be driven by the narrative," Kaplan said. "You don't have the material on the cutting room floor. To finesse that kind of preordained intent you need to let the story tell itself."

"The whole film is about my own journey, and not knowing if I am going to get well," Kaplan said. "Needing to be in the moment, letting the images find their way, I was just trying to document what I was going through. I wasn't trying to make good pictures necessarily; I was trying to cope with my health crisis."

Throughout the film Kaplan keeps the viewer engaged by using humor. "I want the film to be approachable," he said. "Who wants to watch another film about a seriously ill person?"

The film has always been a not-for-profit endeavor for Kaplan, and he's made it his goal to give a copy of the DVD to the family members of cancer patients. "My message to them is that cancer treatments may not be fun, but that you can make it through to the other side," he said.

"Nobody asks for this [cancer], but you can make it through to the other side and you have to believe you can beat it," Kaplan said. "If you can give people a small nugget of belief that they can make it through this, [they] can. We really believe this film can help people. This film was not made for other image-makers, though I hope it's respected by my peers and other photographers," Kaplan said. ■

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