

One in a million

**How the little things add up big
for one local photographer**

The “Turtle” isn’t a picture of road perfection. In this 1983 Toyota Dolphin camper, the charm isn’t in its aesthetic appeal or, more accurately, lack thereof. The walls are thin and tan like a used coffee filter. Strips of rust creep up from the fenders like dead vines in the winter. And the odometer is busted.

With the Turtle, it’s what’s on the inside that counts.

And just like an actual turtle lives inside of its protective shell, Peggy Dyer, the driver, lives inside of her camper.

“It’s been a crazy ride,” says Dyer. “Literally.”

Dyer, who came up with the nickname “Turtle” because of the camper’s slow speed, is a local photographer who also uses the camper as her mobile art studio. And despite the fact that she is basically homeless, Dyer is philanthropic through her photography. She considers her living situation just a small speed bump on a road to make a difference.

“I just want to change the world, basically,” says Dyer, 36, who parks every night outside of her office space in south Boulder after traveling around town taking pictures. “I want to inspire people to connect.”

Her avenue: the One



Peggy Dyer

Million Faces project.

On Feb. 26, Dyer was driving as Bon Jovi’s “Wanted Dead or Alive” came on the radio. As the lyrics “I’ve seen a million faces and I’ve rocked them all” crackled through the old speakers, Dyer got an idea.

She wondered if she could photograph 1 million faces to raise money for local charities, and change the world by building community through art.

Less than a week later, Dyer set up her first One Million Faces photo shoot and shot the first 28 faces. Angie Wise, of Boulder, one Dyer’s closet friends, was the first face.

“It’s not just about me taking a bunch of pictures,” Dyer says. “It’s

about telling the stories of people.”

For a \$10 donation, Dyer takes several black and white portraits of each person, with any message you want on a white board. Messages have ranged from “Hi Mom” to “Anoint the world in dance” to “Cancer, you messed with the wrong bitch.” Everyone has something to say, Dyer says.

After taking the photos, Dyer pastes them next to each other on large pegboards. The faces and messages stand together in a stunning collage of human experience.

Currently, however, the pegboards live in Dyer’s rented storage space. When the One Million

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Faces project progresses, Dyer hopes to display the pegboards in different galleries and coffee shops around Boulder.

Dyer has photographed more than 1,000 faces since February. The faces have come from a variety of events, such as “the Vagina Monologues” at Boulder Theatre in February and the Boulder Creek Festival in May.

Still, the money has hasn’t exactly piled up. At first, Dyer asked for a small donation instead of charging a specific amount for the photos. Bad choice, she says. At the Creek Festival, for example, Dyer shot more than 150 faces, but at the end of the day there was only \$183 in her donation jar. The



The “Turtle.”

money has increased since she initiated the \$10 flat rate, but expenses, such as paying an assistant and gas, drain the funds.

“I haven’t paid myself ever,” Dyer says. “I don’t even have money yet to donate back to my charities. But that doesn’t mean that I don’t believe that it is coming.”

She is only one woman, living in her camper, and 1 million is a lot of faces. Her financial struggles prevent her from focusing on the

project full-time. She pays the bills doing private jobs, which occupies most of her weekday 9-to-5’s. Currently, she is looking for sponsorship and volunteers so she can dedicate more hours to her project.

When Dyer started One Million Faces, she dove into it like a cannonball in a swimming pool. It was quick, made a big splash, and many people got wet. Still, she hasn’t had time to fully work out the

details of how she is going to accomplish her goal.

If Dyer were to spend the next 30 years working on One Million Faces, she would have to photograph more than 30,000 faces every day. At the rate she is going, it would take her 666 years.

But she doesn’t let the uncertainty — or the seeming impossible — frighten her. Things have a way of working out, she says. If the project grew large enough, she could set up One Million Faces offices all over the country and hire a full-time staff. “When I get really scared I just have to tell myself, ‘OK, I can do this,’” Dyer says. “I’ll be fine. Like really, how much worse can things get for me?”

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The little things add up

Each board brings faces together and creates a community. Creating a sense of community is what matters, Dyer says, much more than having a roof over her head.

Each person is one in a million. Yet there is a sense of connection in that you are a part of something larger. As an individual, your contribution is small, but as a whole, the contribution makes a significant impact.

“When you start putting these messages side by side, they start to tell a story,” Dyer says.

She wants her work to bring out the true essence of each person. And there is a sense of warmth in the portraits, like these faces are sharing something intimate and personal with you.

Amy Howard is the executive director of the Boulder-based Davis Phinney Foundation for Parkinson’s, a charity on Dyer’s list.

“Her ability to capture people is unbelievable,” says Howard, who has also posed for One Million Faces. “She is able to capture greatness in people. I’ve never seen a photographer like her.”

‘This is what I’m here to do’

Despite a steady income photographing special events like weddings and bar mitzvahs, when Dyer started the project, she had less than \$500 to her name.

Her financial troubles



followed a canceled photography event and a subsequent lawsuit, which Dyer lost, costing her about \$20,000 and the home she lived in. Shortly after, Dyer found the Turtle, and she bought it for \$3,500 with borrowed money.

“I didn’t want to give up my dream,” Dyer says. “This thing, right here, that I do, taking pictures, telling stories, being with people, this is what I’m great at. This is what I’m here to do.”

Still, when she isn’t behind the lens of a camera, she worries about more than money. Despite eating well and exercising — she teaches a spinning class at Mountain’s Edge Fitness Center — Dyer is overweight. She says she has been rejected by six health insurers who say she is “uninsurable” because of her height-to-weight ratio.

Dyer says she has always struggled with self-esteem and body issues. That’s why the One Million Faces project has meant so much to her personally. It has changed her own beliefs and expectations of herself.

“You go back to that body image stuff, and it’s like I’m an elephant,” Dyer says. “And I’m standing here, as an elephant, just wanting to be a giraffe. I’m never going to be a giraffe.

But I can be a really good elephant. And elephants are strong. And I’m very strong.”

So she chooses strength.

She says she has developed a sense of perspective since she started One Million Faces. When she thinks of her charities, she can’t complain about her “morbidly obese” designation.

Take her friend Chanda Hinton, of Denver, who was shot in a hunting accident when she was 8 years old. The spinal cord injury confined her to a wheelchair. Still, she founded the Chanda Plan, a nonprofit that works to improve the lives of people with disabilities.

Dyer also plans to support the Rett Syndrome Research Trust, Moving to End Sexual Assault and the Shjon Podein’s Children’s Foundation.

“This is my life and this is how I choose it to be. I’m not going to sit here and be a victim. I’m not going to sit here and cry about losing some lawsuit,” Dyer says. “I get to bring a lot of joy to the world through my work. And that is what I want to focus on.”

A million miles away

As the Turtle heads from shoot to shoot, the engine coughs like someone trying to clear her throat. Like someone who is trying to start a conversation.

Dyer wants the One Million Faces project to open up a dialogue between people who would not have communicated otherwise.

*Get your hopes up.
Sacred Earth.*

The world is my family.

Posterboard messages like this are what Dyer says lead to real change in the world — just as the project has led to real change in herself.

When you start to listen to people, you have a better understanding of your community, Dyer says. So she is slowly painting a portrait of America.

“I love the idea of it being art that connects people,” Dyer says.

The Turtle moves unhurriedly, barely reaching speeds above 65 miles per hour at full throttle. Still, no matter how slow the progress, it’s headed in the right direction.

Dyer needs help. But she believes in the power of her community to support her. She already sees herself standing in the Oval Office, shaking hands with President Obama, as she prepares to take his picture as the 1 millionth face.

The end may seem like a million miles away now, Dyer says. But life is fleeting, and you have get in the driver’s seat to have any hope of arriving at your destination.

Even if it’s in a rusted old camper.

“You want to change the world, this is how you do it,” Dyer says. “You figure out what it is that you’re brilliant at, and you show up, and you shine.”

To learn more about how you can help the One Million Faces Project and upcoming events, visit www.onemillionfaces.org.

— By Jessica Warnock