



**EVENING IN HAVANA**  
Alan Lawrence captured this quiet Cuban street scene during a March 2015 workshop excursion to “a place out of time.”

# MASTERCLASSES

Want to broaden your vision, hone your skills, and meet like-minded shooters? You owe it to yourself and your photography to try a workshop. We asked four top teachers and four students what you’ll learn and why you should do it.

By Peter Kolonia

**ALL YEAR LONG**, in beautiful places from Maine to California and beyond, top pro photographers lead shooters like you on exciting photo workshops and expeditions. The benefits of spending a week or more focusing on your photography are nearly endless. You can find new sources of inspiration, hone important camera, composition, or lighting skills, learn from (and with) like-minded artists, and have your

**Student:** Alan Lawrence

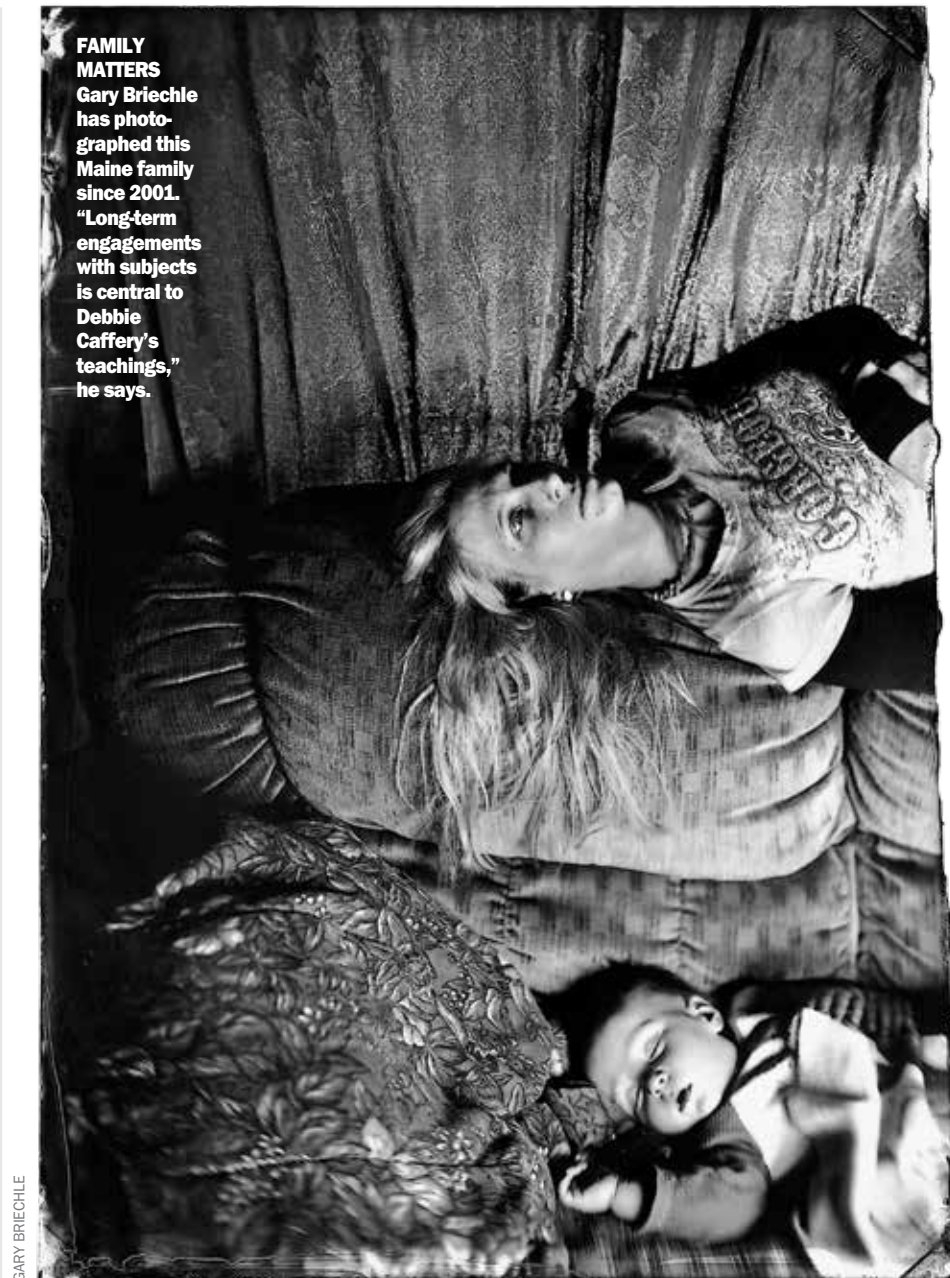
**Past Instructors:**

Jay Maisel, Arthur Meyerson, David duChemin, Michael Karsh

**What Lawrence has Learned:**

“I have always been a natural light shooter, but late in 2014, I took Michael Karsh’s ‘Introduction to Studio Lighting’ at Santa Fe Photographic Workshops. I came home with the ability to creatively set up studio lighting and an understanding of what was needed. The funny thing is that [because of this] I could start teaching my own Level II lighting course at Bellevue College in Bellevue, Washington.”

ALAN LAWRENCE



GARY BRIECHLE

**FAMILY MATTERS**  
Gary Brieche has photographed this Maine family since 2001. “Long-term engagements with subjects is central to Debbie Caffery’s teachings,” he says.

**Student:** Gary Brieche

**Past Instructors:** Debbie Fleming Caffery, Andrea Modica

**What Brieche has Learned:** “One of the most important things I learned from Debbie Caffery is the idea of engagement with subjects—what that can look and feel like. The single word ‘engagement’ is the measure by which I judge photography, my own and others.” Brieche recalls Caffery saying, “I never use long lenses. I like normal fixed lenses. Longer focal lengths put you outside the action, when you really want to be in the middle of it.”





**Student:** Paige Denkin

**Past Instructors:** Alissa and Jacob Hessler

**What Denkin has Learned:** “The Hesslers offer a unique take on education and the workshop routine. To start, they’re avid explorers, adventurers and fog seekers. They’ll show you the highs and lows of the surrounding terrain—and in your work. You will get your boots muddy and lose some beauty sleep, because the best light comes and goes with the sun. Jacob has a natural eye for landscapes, and Alissa will tell you straight what’s working and what isn’t.”

images taken seriously by the top photographers in their fields.

For Paige Denkin, a professional wedding shooter in New York City, workshops have been some of her “best experiences ever.” Taking a landscape photography course given by Jacob and Alissa Hessler at the Maine Media Workshops in Rockport, for example, gave her photography a focus that continues to sustain and inspire her over a year later. “It was absolutely revolutionary,” she says.

For their popular classes taught in Maine, Sedona, Santa Fe, and

**NEAR BIRCH POINT BEACH**  
Taken on a Maine Media Workshop outing near Rockport, this shows the importance of using a fore-, middle-, and background to draw a viewer into a scene, says Paige Denkin.

other locations, the Hesslers try to convey a new way of seeing landscapes, the importance of finding your own style, and ways to build networks of mentors that can support and nurture you into the future. “We strive for relationships with our former students and encourage them to keep in touch with each other. The learning doesn’t stop when the class ends,” says Alissa Hessler.

**COURSE TYPES**

Workshops tend to fall into roughly two categories: technical or aesthetic. The former teaches

mastery of photographic skills most commonly related to lighting, composition, camera control, and processing and organizing images. Aesthetic programs tend to focus on taking better landscape, fine art, documentary, or portrait photographs.

Which type should you attend? “I would say start with the technical just to get it out of the way,” says Michael Karsh, who teaches lighting at the Santa Fe Photographic Workshops. It’s his least favorite type of workshop, but once you’re comfortable with your camera and lights, a much wider array of photo possibilities will open up.

Reed Hoffmann, a long-time instructor in our own Popular Photography Mentor Series program agrees. A good workshop on camera technique, says Hoffmann, “makes for less worry and confusion about buttons, dials,

**Student:** Alex Sneiders

**Past Instructors:** Reed Hoffmann, Joe McNally, David Tejada

**What Sneiders has Learned:** “In almost twenty photo trips and seminars, I have furthered my photographic skills and traveled to places and experienced things I otherwise might not have gone or done. I’ve had my photography critiqued in ways that have visibly paid off in better images. And there are added benefits, too. I’m much more confident now dealing with and directing models, and have made life-long friendships.”

and camera menus. I tell students to solve these technical problems first, then focus on the creative.”

For Alex Sneiders of Minnesota, a regular Popular Photography Mentor Series participant, one of the main technical benefits is being exposed to the new equipment that’s available for students to borrow. “I like getting to try gear that I haven’t used before, and have the chance to decide whether I’m interested in buying it or not.”

For Sneiders, though, one of the primary workshop benefits wasn’t technical at all. “The biggest workshop surprise for me has been seeing how radically different the pictures of the same subject are from student to student. We each find different details significant, and interpret the same scene in very different ways. It makes me to try open my eyes and see things in new ways,” he says.

**TEACHERS AND GURUS**

How to find the best workshop for you? “Reading reviews from past workshops and seeing the projects that came out of the classes will help you decide on a workshop,” says Denkin. “Social media is a great way to get an inside look at a class or retreat. Do they have a dedicated [Instagram] hashtag? Explore it. What kind of work was posted, and what do students say about the program?”

Of course, to get the most out of a workshop, you need a teacher whose background and photographic sensibilities jibe with

your own aesthetic and/or technical goals. The best are true gurus, who attract coteries of students who sign up again and again. “I’ve taken half-a-dozen workshops with Debbie Fleming Caffery,” says Guggenheim Fellow Gary Briechle of Rockport, Maine. “While that may suggest a lot of repetition, the experiences have been anything but monotonous. Debbie is a story teller, and there’s a lot of insight in her words.” Each story is wrapped up with wisdom and keen observations about photography and life itself, he says.

Are you looking for your guru? A good starting place would be an instructor who’s done it for years. As mentor Reed Hoffmann puts it, “I’ve conducted hundreds of workshops and seminars over the past 13 years and have learned how to tailor my message depending on the individual.”

The workshop experience is packed with nonphotographic benefits, too. Says Caffery, a prolific teacher, “One of the wonderful things about workshops is [that] students who do not have a photography community at home can build one during the workshop. Most students are in search of creative communication and I’ve often heard so many say ‘I can’t believe someone understands me!’”

Reed Hoffmann agrees. “After I started teaching hands-on

ALEX SNEIDERS



**MODEL BEHAVIOR**  
Alex Sneiders made this image at a Popular Photography Mentor Series flash seminar in New York City. “I learned the basics of backlighting and working with models that day,” he remembers.

workshops, I realized how much more people enjoyed photography when they did it with other people. Students feed off of each others’ energy, ideas, problem-solving techniques, and visions. Photography is a very fun thing to do in a group!” Often, when photographers hit a creative wall, he adds, it’s because they’re working by themselves in a creative vacuum. They can often break through with feedback and advice from instructors and their fellow students.

According to Briechle, “A workshop is such a wonderful immersion. So much of photography is a solitary endeavor, and a week with others in the same boat is exhilarating. It’s so beneficial and healthy to share and hear other people’s stories. Often students become friends for life. I’ve even heard at the Maine workshops there have been a few marriages!”

PAIGE DENKIN