

The New York Times

Ebola

BY DANIEL BEREHULAK

NOMINATION FOR THE 2015 PULITZER PRIZE
CATEGORY 14: FEATURE PHOTOGRAPHY



For four long months, Daniel Berehulak performed the same exacting ritual, cloaking himself from head to toe in a protective suit, face mask, three pairs of gloves — and chronicling the full, excruciating arc of Ebola as it tore across West Africa.

His masterly work for The New York Times, by far the most comprehensive set of images of the epidemic, drew global attention to a story that no news organization has covered as extensively. Living inside the Ebola zone, Berehulak captured many major developments, finding the family of patient zero in Guinea, documenting the chaotic spread of the disease before the world took notice, and bearing witness to the consequences as it swept through cities, ripping apart families.

His stark and irrepressible images, at once brutal and compassionate, helped force the world to care about a region where suffering is expected, even tolerated. The anguish contorting a son's face as he loses his father, the pitched anger of a community under quarantine, the unbroken faith of health workers at prayer, the shocking sight of stiff, dying children carted off by faceless men in moon suits — Berehulak's unforgettable pictures conveyed both the urgency of the epidemic and the humanity of its victims.

The risks were terrifying. Berehulak remembers the panic he felt after a spray of fluids, flicked from a water bag carried by a health worker who had just been disinfected outside an Ebola ward, suddenly landed in his mouth and eye. Was it bleach? Water? Something much worse?

Five days later, his body temperature rising, "alarm bells started ringing," he recalled. "I started thinking back on everything I had done. I had been in a room with a woman who died only three hours later. These are all the things that go through your mind."

Thankfully, he was all right, and soon jumped right back into his work, continuing the longest deployment of any photographer in the Ebola zone.

Indeed, Berehulak's power starts with his patience. In the early days of the epidemic, as hospitals began to fill, he sat with Ebola patients for hours as they lay in the dirt, writhing in pain, waiting for medical attention. There he met James, the helpless little boy being hauled off by moon men. James's father propped up the boy, urging him to drink, but James kept fading, started convulsing and finally went limp. The crowd gasped and James's father started bawling, walking away in agony. But Berehulak stayed with the boy, eventually noticing along with others that he was still breathing, faintly. Finally, workers donned their suits and came from the Ebola treatment center to bring him for treatment. Berehulak's haunting picture of the boy being taken away, an icon of the epidemic's wrath, was the product of six hours at James's side. (According to health officials, James died shortly after being admitted.)

Imagine the ceaseless rigor this kind of photography requires, day after day — often shooting while sheathed in full protective gear in the stifling West African heat, sprayed with chlorine from head to toe after each session, or, for reasons of respect and access, working without protective gear at all. Imagine trying to make pictures in a frenzied, surging crowd — without standing too close to anyone else. Imagine portraying the intimate details of life and loss inside countless, crowded shanties, like the body of a lifeless

man surrounded by his collection of stuffed animals and shoes, without ever touching or bumping into anything around you.

“I focus on the tiniest details,” Berehulak recalled. “My elbows are tucked underneath me as I’m walking in these tiny, cramped rooms, making sure I didn’t touch any of the door jambs.”

Imagine spending three continuous weeks inside an Ebola treatment unit, as Berehulak did, constantly awash in patients and highly infectious bodily fluids, capturing memorable acts of bravery and tragedy while trying to keep infection at bay.

There was also overt hostility to contend with, like the time Berehulak went with body collectors down a steep cliff to a riverside compound in Liberia. The dead man’s relatives greeted the outsiders with fury, knowing they would not get the body back for a respectful burial. A half-hour standoff ensued, a chorus of weeping, shouting and pacing inside the blood-soaked room where the man had died, fluids spewing from his mouth.

Berehulak captured the swell of emotions: the family’s profound grief at losing their patriarch; their anger at the government for doing little beyond retrieving corpses; the despair of relatives who wanted to keep the patriarch’s body for a proper funeral; the fear that doing so would spread contagion.

With his months of experience in Ebola-afflicted areas, Berehulak gave hard-earned safety advice to other photographers who dared to venture into the hot zone. He also focused on Ebola’s lasting effects on society, including the many orphans left behind. In Sierra Leone, shooting at an Ebola care center that had become a de facto orphanage, he came across Sweetie Sweetie, a girl thought to be 4 years old who had lost both parents to Ebola. She was the youngest of the children there, and Berehulak spent hours with her, documenting an eerie maturity that may have come from caring for her dying parents. Sweetie Sweetie quietly folded all her clothes, even her pillowcases, without anyone asking her to. His photo of her says it all: She sits silently on the edge of a neatly made bed, alone.

These photos of Ebola and its impact are not easily forgotten. We very proudly nominate Daniel Berehulak for the Pulitzer Prize for Feature Photography.