

In 1969 the world discovered the "picture takin' man," James Van Der Zee. He was 82 when the HARLEM ON MY MIND show opened at the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art. The exhibition brought long overdue recognition to the uptown photographer, who painstakingly recorded the Harlem experience for more than 50 years. Van Der Zee, however, didn't set out to be a pioneer. He started taking pictures at age 14 when photography was still a primitive process and has lived to see a time when photographic images are transmitted electronically across the country on telephone lines. Today at 96, and still taking photographs, he offers a few reflections on his life and work.

He says, "...happiness is a sort of perfume. You can't pour it on somebody else without getting a few drops on yourself."

James Van Der Zee sees his goals as a photographer in simple terms. "I always wanted people to look good, to look the way they wanted to look." And making people look good was something James Van Der Zee did extraordinarily well. So well that his rediscovered photographs of Harlem's socialites, lodgemembers, politicians and matrons now command Madison Avenue prices. But James Van Der Zee has lived to realize more than his goal of bringing a little beauty to everyday reality.

"I'm just glad someone is able to get something out of all this."

The "something" James Van Der Zee has given America is a unique chronicle of some of its lesser-known players. From bandleaders to barbershop barons, from "Gypsy dancer" to Garveyites, he has served up the soul of an era and made it possible for millions to get in touch with facets of black life that some never knew existed. Because of James Van Der Zee, an incredibly complex network of relationships will never be the same. Blacks to whites. Whites to whites. Blacks to blacks. Photographers, like acclaimed photojournalist Gordon Parks, and today's young black commercial photographers, acknowledge Van Der Zee's influence and carry on his tradition. No matter how modest his original goal, what James Van Der Zee has created is a triumph of artistry and technology.

Better communication is the key to a brighter future for all of us. And there is much we can all learn from great communicators like James Van Der Zee. The Bell System is proud to acknowledge their contribution to society. As pioneers in communications technology, the Bell System knows better communications make a better world.



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