

WE SOLD A WINNER: ON RESILIENT AMERICAN DREAMS

Photography by Edie Bresler

Exhibition reflection essays by

Michael Frantz
Professor of Mathematics

and

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Director of Civic and Community Engagement

Irene Carlson Gallery of Photography
October 20 through December 12, 2014

A reception for the photographer will take place at
5:30 – 7:00 p.m. Thursday, October 30, 2014, in
the Carlson Gallery, Miller Hall.

Edie Bresler's thoughts about her portfolio ...

In the series, *We Sold A Winner*, I look closely at American communities through the lens of state-run lotteries. By focusing on the people and places behind this robust Main Street economy, I seek to offer an alternative to the familiar picture of ebullient lottery winners holding a large facsimile check. These are instead stories of resilience, desire, money, and a changing American dream.

I photograph the small, neighborhood, family-run convenience stores and marketplaces across the country where a winning jackpot ticket was sold. After selling a winning ticket, stores become known as lucky, inciting a buying frenzy among local players. This generates huge ticket sales. Whether you are pro, con, or indifferent to the lottery, it is likely that your community derives a benefit and depends on this revenue.

Storeowners represent a diverse cross-section of Americans. Some are recent immigrants while others are the third or fourth generation to operate the family business. After selling a winning ticket, they receive a bonus commission, although the amount depends on the size of the jackpot and individual state rules. For example, a \$200 million winning ticket in Passaic, New Jersey, resulted in a \$10,000 bonus commission for its storeowner while an equal prize in Illinois netted \$500,000 for that owner.

I follow the trail of winning jackpot tickets across the country to highlight an overlooked landscape of income inequality and to portray some of the people along Main Street experiencing economic hardships. I consider my photographs to be collaborations. I spend a lot of time talking with owners, clerks, and lottery players, who say they are working harder, longer days without attaining the financial security they seek for themselves and their family. Stories and sites are located through copious book research and scores of daily Google alerts.

About the photographer ...

I grew up in a town close to New York City and spent as much time riding my bike exploring the woods in undeveloped tracts of land as I did getting lost inside MOMA and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photography has always been the way I make sense of the world. I got my first camera when I was thirteen-years-old, around the same time my mother was diagnosed with ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease). She eventually succumbed to the illness four years later. In college, I majored in chemistry but after two years dropped out and ended up traveling and hitchhiking across Israel and Europe. I received my BFA in photography from the School of Visual Arts in New York and my MFA from the Art Institute of Boston. But I often say my real education came from the school of hard knocks. Teaching, freelance gigs, assisting at non-profit galleries and friendships with other artists have all helped sustain and inform my personal artistic style.

My projects look closely at American values. I have an abiding concern for the sociological, psychological, and conceptual underpinnings of choice and free will. Projects include repurposing found objects into tabletop and room tableaux, explorations into Thoreau's ideology of self-reliance and a current focus on main street lottery economies. Recent profiles include Feature Shoot, Inside Business, Lenscratch, Photo District News and the PBS show Greater Boston with Emily Rooney. I have had solo exhibitions at the Griffin Museum of Photography, The Boston Center for the Arts, Visual Studies Workshop, CEPA and participated in numerous group exhibitions. I am keenly interested in the social potential of art and in 2012 created a participatory community installation, "You Scratch My Back; I'll Scratch Yours," to foster a public discourse about the lottery. I have received funding from the New York Foundation for the Arts, the Massachusetts Cultural Council, the Somerville Arts Council, Simmons College, and the Berkshire Taconic Artist Resource Trust. A teacher since 1986, I am currently an associate professor of practice at Simmons College in Boston where I lead the photography program. I also write regularly for Photograph Magazine.

Some Personal Reflections on
Edie Bresler's *We Sold a Winner: On Resilient American Dreams*

Michael Frantz

It is the great societal equalizer. It puts the one-percenters with their walnut-paneled executive jets on the same playing field as the lowest paid dishwasher after a busy night at the local cafe. It is hope. It is the sum of all dreams. It is belief in magic and mystery and the gods of chance who occasionally bend down to drop a magic token into an outstretched hand. It is ... mathematical randomness, made manifest through a myriad of lotteries across the country. Edie Bresler has captured that randomness with fresh eyes by examining not the recipients of the magical winning numbers, but the conduit through which the lightning strikes: the merchants who sell the winning tickets. First impression: lightning can strike anywhere, at any time, including rapid multiple strikes, or not at all. Second impression: the lottery winners are by no means the only persons whose lives are significantly affected by these random transactions that deliver staggering amounts of money.

The sale of lottery tickets has often been referred to as the “stupid tax,” permitting people who refuse to play the lottery to not participate in funding state initiatives from a 25% share of the winnings. The reasoning goes that since the odds of winning a Mega Millions jackpot approach one in 250,000,000 or more, the chances are essentially zero, so why throw your money away? One commonly hears comparisons such as “You have a better chance of being killed by a shark attack” (1 in 3.7 million), or “killed by lightning in your lifetime” (1 in 134,000), or “being injured by a toilet” (1 in 10,000).” (That last one is fairly scary!) And yet ... and yet ... a very few lucky people DO win hundreds of millions of dollars, on a fairly regular basis somewhere around the country, and sometimes even win multiple times. And in parallel fashion, although most lottery ticket emporiums never sell a monster winning ticket, there are those few that do, and as documented by Bresler's photographs and captions, sometimes multiple times. As we all know, the chances of winning big may be infinitesimally small, but if you don't buy a ticket, the chances of winning even a dollar are precisely zero. What gives here? What kind of strange psychology spreads like a virus across the landscape when a certain tipping point is reached, say \$300 million, and the lines at lottery ticket sellers stretch to the end of the block overnight? It requires a complex mix of mathematics, perception, and the psychology of rewards to even begin to get a fix on exactly where that point might be located, and what variables might cause it to fluctuate in different regions or economic environments.

Back to the photographs: Tony has clearly outfoxed those who would label him as an involuntary taxee by scavenging for his hopes and dreams at no cost to him. What could be better? And he knows it. Was there ever any town more the heart of America than Winner, South Dakota? A canonical Main Street U.S.A., it is also home to the Ampride convenience store, purveyors of \$202 million worth of magic in one shot. Here is a store in Harlem that gave up ticket sales due to increased robberies after a Big Win. There is Karen from the Borderline Cantina on the Colorado-Wyoming line, selling more tickets than any other merchant in Colorado due to the Wyoming traffic, while Google Earth Street View reveals a most ordinary pop-up building with nothing but unpopulated ranchland as far as the eye can see. Amar in Somerville, Massachusetts: how could anyone ever resist an invitation to buy a ticket from this amiable man?

What's in it for the purveyors of the Big Win tickets? Often a \$10,000 bonus on a \$1 million jackpot, but sometimes more (\$500,000) and sometimes much less (\$5000), depending on state regulations and jackpot sizes.

Edie Bresler
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Bresler reveals through her captions the life changes provided to some of the lucky merchants: paying off extended family loans, down payments on homes, or making otherwise impossible special purchases.

Who are these people? They are you and me and everyone. Look into their faces. Mathematical probability and randomness are free of bias, racism, cultural stereotypes, age, and gender discrimination. It is the purest of the pure: selecting without emotion, without logic, without predisposition, without context or environment, without predictability in the small, but paradoxically, completely predictable in the large. As a professional mathematician, Bresler's photographs felt to me like a long overdue reminder of the nature of mathematical randomness. They are visual punches that drove notice home time and time again: mathematics is blind and undertakes to lift us up or strike us down in sequences of consequence and space we cannot begin to fathom, nor should we try. Sometimes life just ... is. Go buy a ticket.

-Michael Frantz
October 20, 2014

Los Numeros

Reflections on Edie Bresler's *We Sold a Winner: On Resilient American Dreams*

Marisol Morales

How many times in my life have I heard my family speak about “los numeros:” the numbers, hitting the lottery? My childhood memories are filled with runs made with my grandmother to the bodega (the corner store) to pick “los numeros.” Picking the right numbers came with hopes of hitting it big and the dreams that might follow a big win. We imagined what bills we would pay off, what house we would buy, and what expensive trips we would take. Puerto Rico was always on the list of things to do if you hit the numbers. And the winnings would always be shared with family. The numbers were never thought of as an individual win: we would all win if we only hit the “big one.”

The landscape of those corner stores or bodegas in Chicago changed based on what neighborhood you lived in or visited. In the Latino/Puerto Rican community you always heard salsa blaring from the store and conversations going on as people walked up to the counter to get their “numeros” and a café con leche. My family would always do a mix of a “quick pick” and our tried and true “numeros.” Those magic numbers always included a certain combination of relative’s birthdays or some other significant and highly personal number from our life. On the north side of Chicago where I lived, Indian families owned many of the corner stores. Whereas the cultural familiarities of our heritage and old neighborhood weren’t present, the same hopes and anticipation of getting the winning numbers were shared.

Edie Bresler’s photography exhibition, titled, *We Sold A Winner: On Resilient American Dreams*, reminds me of these family and neighborhood experiences back in my hometown of Chicago. The Salgado Family (Owner, player, winner) Herndon, Virginia, 2014, and Inez and Antonio, Cross Street Market, Somerville, Massachusetts 2011, recall my neighborhood bodegas, where Guatemalan, Honduran, and Brazilian flags would simply be replaced by Puerto Rican ones. What makes these pictures familiar are not only the flags that represent cultural pride and cultural identity, but also the sense of family that is present in each one of the photographs, including the kitchen table and the novela playing in the background of The Salgado Family photograph. In the image of Inez and Antonio, the Virgin Mary in the background almost becomes the third family member in the scene, pulling forth the watchful and protective role that the Virgin Mary plays in so many Latino Catholic families, especially when called upon for help in winning the “numeros.”

My family always believed in the possibility of the “numeros” and the chance of winning the big one was perpetually inspired by our little wins. Ten dollars here and one hundred and fifty dollars there provided the promise of a jackpot and the promise of a dream. As a child I remember being critical of this fantasy, thinking, “No one from the city ever wins the big one.” It always seemed that it was someone else—someone who did not look or talk like us, from some remote part of the state—who won the jackpot. Nonetheless, my family played religiously. Even on road trips whenever we stopped at a gas station my parents would buy a ticket. On those occasions when the Mega Millions jackpots were high, my father’s work colleagues would pool their money and their dreams: invested in the hope of being able to retire early.

Bresler's photographs depict one of the most iconic symbols of working class neighborhoods in the United States. Amar, Neighborhood Market, Somerville Massachusetts, 2011, for example, shows the quintessential corner store found in so many working class urban neighborhoods. It stocks everything from coffee to sandwiches to diapers, and is the place to stop when you don't have the time or ability to make the trek to the commercial grocery store. Large chain supermarkets are often lacking in working class neighborhoods. Thus these corner stores and bodegas sell much-needed essentials as well as lottery dreams.

Particularly ubiquitous in cities, the corner store, or the bodega, is where dreams of having "enough" or "catching up" are sold through those lottery tickets. The resilience of working class and economically disadvantaged communities is not only measured by their—our—ability to struggle through the challenges, but also through the capacity to maintain hope and optimism in spite of these challenges. "Los numeros" allow us to be winners in spirit and keep us coming back for that chance.

-Marisol Morales
October 20, 2014



Winner, South Dakota, 2014

The site of a winning \$202 Powerball jackpot winner. The name of the town actually dates back to 1909 when homesteaders won a bitter fight to become the county seat and changed the town name from Lamro to Winner.



Fast Freddie's, Wakefield, Massachusetts, 2010

Site of the first winning \$10 million scratch ticket in the country. The owner received a \$50,000 bonus commission.



The Patel Family, Lowell, Massachusetts, 2012

Considered a very lucky store by local players, they sold two winning \$1 million jackpot tickets in the last five years. They received a \$10,000 bonus commission for each winner.



Dick, regular player, Carr, Colorado, 2014
Dick lives in Wyoming where there is no state lottery. He plays every week at a store along the Colorado border on his way to visit his daughter and grandson.



*Frank and Rafaella,
Somerville, Massachusetts, 2011*
Frank and Rafaella run the oldest family-owned convenience store in Somerville, Massachusetts. Frank is pointing to a photograph of his father who helped him buy the shop. After 57 years in business and despite a loyal local clientele, they have never sold a jackpot winner.



Randolph, Massachusetts, 2010
The owner is the third generation of his family to work this small shop. In 2010, he sold a winning \$1 million jackpot and received a \$10,000 bonus commission. Eight years earlier he sold a winning \$4 million jackpot and received a \$40,000 bonus. Local players consider Minihan's a very lucky store.



*Inez and Antonio, Cross Street Market,
Somerville, Massachusetts, 2011*
After 20 years in business, they have never
sold a jackpot winner.



*The Salgado Family (Owner, player, winner),
Herndon, Virginia, 2014*
A family of five runs this local store where the
mom and one of the daughters are also
frequent players. When the daughter won \$3
million on a Powerball ticket she paid off the
entire family's debts. This included debts
belonging to aunts and uncles on both sides of
the family who had helped her parents when
they were new immigrants. As owners, the
family also received a \$10,000 bonus
commission. "I'm still playing because I think I
might win again."



*Ed, regular player,
Braddock, Pennsylvania, 2014*
Ed is a retired tradesman, who says he likes to
play every day. His three children are grown
with families of their own. Ed and his wife
recently adopted two children from the
neighborhood, ages 6 and 9.

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*Steve, Coulson's News,
Albany, New York, 2012*

Sold a winning \$319 million Mega Millions jackpot, which is the largest jackpot won by a single ticket. Received a \$10,000 bonus commission from New York State.



Karen, Carr Colorado, 2014

Karen oversees the daily operations at Borderline Cantina, a store that sits on the border between Colorado and Wyoming. It is the number one retailer of lottery tickets in the state of Colorado because of all the players who cross over from Wyoming to play. Wyoming players can now participate in multi-state games, but there are still no instant scratch games sold in the state.



Rock Hall, Maryland, 2013

A regular and local player won \$1 million on a scratch ticket in 2013 and the owner of this store received a \$1,000 bonus commission.



Denise, Red Bud, Illinois, 2013

Denise is manager at MotoMart where a winning \$656 million Mega Millions ticket was sold. Her corporate bosses received the maximum Illinois bonus commission of \$500,000. In an unusual gesture they gifted \$50,000 to be shared among the seven workers at the store. As manager Denise received \$25,000 and used the money to purchase a bassoon for her husband, a retired member of the Air Force Band. “We tried to get a bank loan several years ago but were turned down.”



*Peter, Sheepshead Bay,
Brooklyn, New York, 2012*

Peter makes original origami sculptures from the discarded tickets his customers leave behind.



*Alaa, L&P Market,
Somerville, Massachusetts, 2011*

Alaa sold a winning \$1 million scratch ticket in the summer of 2014 to a local player. He received a \$10,000 bonus commission.



*Rakesh and Ashok,
Levittown News and Tobacco,
Fairless Hills, Pennsylvania, 2013*
Sold a \$50 million jackpot ticket and received
a \$100,000 bonus commission.



Homer, Nebraska, 2014
Site of a winning \$1 million Powerball ticket
to a regular and local player. The owner
received a \$10,000 bonus commission.



Stafford, Virginia, 2014
A local couple who are long-time players at
Taylor's Market won \$4 million on a scratch
ticket. The owner received a \$10,000 bonus
commission.



*Alan, Bonser's Market,
Custer, Michigan, 2013*

Alan, a fourth generation owner of Bonser's, sold the business to Raj in 2012. He then stayed on to smooth the transition with the locals. While he owned the business, they never sold a winning jackpot ticket.



*Raj, Bonser's Market,
Custer, Michigan, 2013*

Located in the small village of Custer (population 284), Bonser's is well known for their homemade sausages. Raj sold a \$13.3 million classic lotto winner in August 2013 and received the maximum bonus commission, which in Michigan is \$5000.



*Amar, Neighborhood Market,
Somerville, Massachusetts, 2011*

Amar sold a winning \$1 million scratch ticket and used the \$10,000 bonus commission to put a down payment on a house nearby where he still lives with his wife and two daughters.



*Banned from the lottery,
Harlem, New York, 2012*

On New Years Eve 2008, a clerk working in this store won \$10,000 a week for life on a scratch ticket. Afterwards the owner experienced a rise in ticket thefts. Unwilling to install expensive security systems, he banned the sale of lottery products from his shop. Owners are liable for the cost of any stolen or lost tickets.



Tony, ticket hunter, 2012

Tony collects discarded tickets from the trash of neighborhood stores. He is looking for winning tickets inadvertently thrown away. "Some weeks I can make \$200."



Detroit, Michigan, 2013

Where did the \$65.5 billion go that Americans spent on lottery tickets in 2012? About 60% is paid out in prizes, 25% goes to designated state budget items, 5-6% is spent on bonus commissions to retailers and 9% goes to administrative costs, which includes hundreds of millions on annually on advertising.