

# Love Me Always: Photographer Odell Mitchell celebrates his family in photos and in book

By Mary Delach Leonard, Beacon staff

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The living room walls of Odell and Linda Mitchell's house in O'Fallon, Ill., are very carefully papered with the pages of a work in progress: His photographs. Her words. The story of an American family.

For 24 years, the name of photojournalist Odell Mitchell Jr. was familiar to readers of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. On any given day, his news pictures captured the glory or the heartbreak of the well known and the unknown. Triumphant political candidates. Victorious football players. Soldiers returning from war. The reverence of the pope in quiet prayer amid the splendor of the St. Louis Cathedral. The anguish of a mother whose child was shot on a city street.

During those same years, Mitchell turned his camera loose inside his own house, focusing on the everyday moments of his own family. Odell Mitchell Jr., the news photographer, is also Dad, the Mitchell family historian, personal chronicler of his wife Linda and their daughter Aviva Jaye and son Odell III. From birth to adulthood, Mitchell photographed his children's first steps, baths and haircuts -- their ups, their downs, their smiles and their tears.

"When they did things that I knew would be important for them to see later -- when they got older -- I took their pictures," Mitchell said.

And sometimes, he didn't need a reason. He just took their pictures.

When they graduated from college, Mitchell presented each child with photographic albums -- their lives told in his pictures.

Mitchell will share selections from these photographic albums in the exhibit "Love Me Always: A Photographic Celebration of African-American Children From Birth to College" that will run from Feb. 27-March 3 at Gallery 101 in Collinsville. In conjunction with the exhibit, he and Linda, an educator, have produced a children's book by the same name.

The Mitchells say the photographs transcend racial boundaries. He sees the book as family history; she sees it as a way to talk to elementary school children about their own lives and families.

"I can teach through these pictures: 'Here is a photo of children helping out at home. How do you help out at home?' " said Linda Mitchell who wrote the text. "I saw a need for a book about African-American children because they don't often see books with children who look like they do."

The book, which is self-published, is available at [www.blurb.com](http://www.blurb.com). The Mitchells have plans for two more books, currently being developed in storyboards on the walls of their living room.

Well-known St. Louis children's author Patricia McKissack said she was taken by Mitchell's photographs. McKissack said she never advises other writers on their works, but she made an exception with the Mitchells because his photographs are so special.

"I encouraged them to continue with their project because it is so unique and well done," she said.

McKissack said the Mitchells have successfully used their personal photographs as a vehicle to tell a larger story -- a tough task for an author.

"Most people can't take a real daughter, a real child, a real setting, a real environment and make it have universal appeal," she said. "Most of the time when people try to do that, it becomes so personal that other people can't relate to it. But you want people to look at your daughter and say, 'That's my daughter, too.' "

Mitchell, who left the Post-Dispatch in 2007, now has his own photography business and also teaches at Blackburn College in Carlinville, St. Louis Community College at Forest Park and Lewis and Clark Community College in Godfrey. Aviva Jaye is now 26 and pursuing a musical career in New York. Odell III -- his nickname is Mickey -- is 24, married, works in Chicago and is establishing his own design business.

Of all the photographs he has taken throughout his career, the pictures of his family are the most important, Mitchell said. He made a point of including a particularly meaningful picture in his children's albums.

"It is a picture of my father who they didn't get a chance to meet. He passed away when I was a senior in high school," Mitchell said.

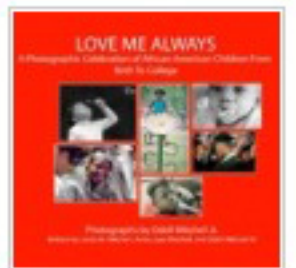
Mitchell said he stresses to his students the importance of photography as a bridge across generations, a way to connect children with their ancestors. It is a message he will share through his photography exhibit.

"I always tell people, 'Make sure you document your family's history,' " he said.

That said, there aren't many pictures of Odell Mitchell Jr. in his collections. The family historian was too busy on the other side of the camera.

## LOVE ME ALWAYS:

A Photographic Celebration of African-American Children from Birth to College



**What:** A photography exhibit featuring the work of local news photographer Odell Mitchell Jr.

**When:** Opening reception, 5-7 p.m., Sat., Feb. 27. The exhibit runs through March 13

**Where:** Gallery 101, 101 East Main St., Collinsville

**How much:** Free and open to public

**Information:** Call Janice Gregory at 618-593-5146, or visit [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/love.me.always). To view photos, [click here](#). The book is available at [www.blurb.com](http://www.blurb.com).



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE MITCHELL FAMILY

For a change, Odell Mitchell Jr. (left) is in the picture with his wife, Linda, and son Mickey and daughter Aviva.

