

In the name of the father

Garry Clarkson's experiences in gaining access to his own child inspired him to document the **Fathers 4 Justice** campaign through reportage and portraiture. He talks to **David Clark** about his work



ABOVE Photographer Garry Clarkson was drawn to the Fathers 4 Justice movement by his own personal experiences of fighting for equal parenting

RIGHT Campaigner Ron Davies, a few days after he was involved in throwing flour bombs during Prime Minister's Question Time. Garry used a specialist film light to achieve the 'window' effect

As my interview with Garry Clarkson begins, he's temporarily called away by his eight-year-old daughter, Niámh. She is having trouble with her electronic pet, a Tamagotchi, which needs 'feeding'. 'It's sad,' says Garry. 'You want your children to engage in the world, then they spend their time getting stressed over a virtual pet.' Then he says a fond goodbye to her as she leaves to go to her 'other home', her mother's house. 'She's happy to have two homes,' he says. 'She didn't choose the situation she's in, with her parents separated, so she shouldn't be penalised by being prevented having a meaningful relationship with her Dad.'

Garry's own year-long tussle with the courts for shared residency of his child was the catalyst for his photographic project on the Fathers 4 Justice group. The group hit the headlines between 2003 and 2005 with a series of protests designed to highlight the plight of divorced men who were being denied access to their children, as part of a campaign for equal parenting and family law reform.

Protesting fathers dressed as comic-book superheroes such as Spiderman and Batman scaled the façade of Buckingham Palace or climbed 120ft cranes, while others threw flour bombs from the Guest's Gallery of the House of Commons during Prime Minister's Question Time – prompting an anthrax alert. The protesters were sometimes vilified in the press, but the group ultimately achieved its aim of raising the issue of fathers' rights.

Garry, 41, became involved with the group after a chance meeting with its founder, Matt O'Connor, via the Equal Parenting Council, an organisation which gives legal advice to fathers. Garry had already carved out a successful career as a photographer, kick-started by his coverage of the 1989 book-burning in his home city of Bradford, following the publication of Salman Rushdie's controversial book *The Satanic Verses*.

The pictures were published widely and led to him working for national newspapers, including *The Independent* and *The Guardian*. However, his career later developed away from documentary photography and he began working more in the film industry, making corporate videos. →





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ABOVE Mike Wiffen dressed as Spiderman and staged a crane protest, 120 feet above Manchester city centre during the Labour Party Conference in March 2004

LEFT Painter and decorator Jason Hatch in the Batman costume he wore when he scaled the front of Buckingham Palace and protested on a ledge

← The Fathers 4 Justice project took him back to the documentary photography with which he started his career, but evolved into two separate strands. Garry would photograph the protesters in action during demonstrations – sometimes in the act of being arrested. However, due to the necessity of keeping the planned events secret, he found it difficult to get information about where and when protests were going to take place. 'I sometimes got a tip-off from Matt, but I wasn't a member at that time and didn't have insider knowledge,' Garry says. 'So I thought, how do you photograph something that's missing? I couldn't photograph the event and I couldn't photograph the children that the father didn't see.'

For the documentary work, Garry used his 35mm Leica gear – mainly an M6 and occasionally an R6 – with 24mm, 35mm and 50mm lenses. 'The reportage is about action, activism, and controversial, semi-illegal things like storming courts,' he says. However, he had become disillusioned with traditional documentary work. 'I've never been comfortable about flying in, taking photographs of demos and flying out again. For me, it doesn't say anything about what's going on.'

Garry decided to work with the group in a collaborative way, inspired by the work of Ernest Withers, one of the main photographers in the American civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, who documented the movement from the inside. He asked Matt O'Connor if he could have access to the group's members so he could do formal portraits of the men at home. For these pictures, he chose medium-format kit. At first he used an old mid-1960s Rolleiflex TLR, which he bought for £50, then later a Mamiya 6.

'The square format is perfect for portraiture, as it's not dynamic like the rectangular 35mm format and forces the viewer to concentrate on the subject,' says Garry. 'I used Fujifilm Velvia 50 and lit the guys, using experience I'd gained in the film industry. I did it this way because →



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F4J member Paul Robinson at home, March 2006. Paul was arrested for allegedly throwing eggs at Downing Street during a demo

◀ I was getting to know them and I wanted to make portraits which questioned the way they were being represented in the media.

For instance, the *Daily Mail* ran an article on Ron Davies, who took part in the flour protest in the House of Commons, and described him as a terrorist. I photographed him at home in his tiny bedsit, a couple of days after the protest, using a family photo album to suggest what's missing. I also put a bag of flour in the frame as a clue to what he had done. Mostly, the portraits are about the domestic and the private, visiting their private world. I wanted them to be considered, quiet pictures, ones that captured the living bereavement that these guys were experiencing.

The group's essentially humorous and non-violent activities, which included members dressed as Santa Claus storming the Lord Chancellor's office, received little attention at first. However, when they began scaling Buckingham Palace, the international press began to take an interest. Garry suddenly found himself getting calls from the picture editor of *Time* magazine. The media wanted the inside story behind the headlines and he was in the ideal position to provide it.

However, once Fathers 4 Justice had succeeded in highlighting family law issues, their work was done. 'There were lots of people jumping on the bandwagon and trying to make a name for themselves, which diluted the issue,'

says Garry. After two and a half years of activism, the Fathers 4 Justice group disbanded in January 2006 following allegations about a plot by group members to kidnap Tony Blair's son Leo. A splinter group known as 'Real Fathers 4 Justice' has recently staged a protest at Westminster Abbey, but none of the original group's members was involved.

The experience of working collaboratively with a group, which was a new idea to Garry when he started, has sparked off other projects for him. He now sometimes works with charities, often letting the groups use the pictures free. That arrangement allows him to get better access to group members and activities, and enables him to get the pictures behind the hard news headlines – as he did with Fathers 4 Justice. These projects – which may or may not bring any financial return – are funded by his film and video PR work.

After three years working on the project Garry continues to photograph the group's former members, and he is currently trying to finance an exhibition of prints from the project. He will juxtapose the images of the men protesting with the portraits made in quieter moments. 'In these pictures, I'm trying to make people question their ways of looking at things, rather than accepting a stereotype,' Garry says. 'For me, these are pictures about loss and absence. If the feeling that those guys were experiencing is the main thing that comes across through the pictures, then I've succeeded.' **AP**

● To see more of Garry's work, visit his website at www.garryclarkson.com. Garry will be giving a talk with fellow photographer John Angerson on the pleasures and pitfalls of pursuing a personal project on 15 October 2006. It takes place at the National Museum of Photography, Film and Television in Bradford, West Yorkshire. Tickets cost £8 and are available from Robert Gates who can be contacted on 01274 542861 or via email at bob@rpsyorkshire.org.