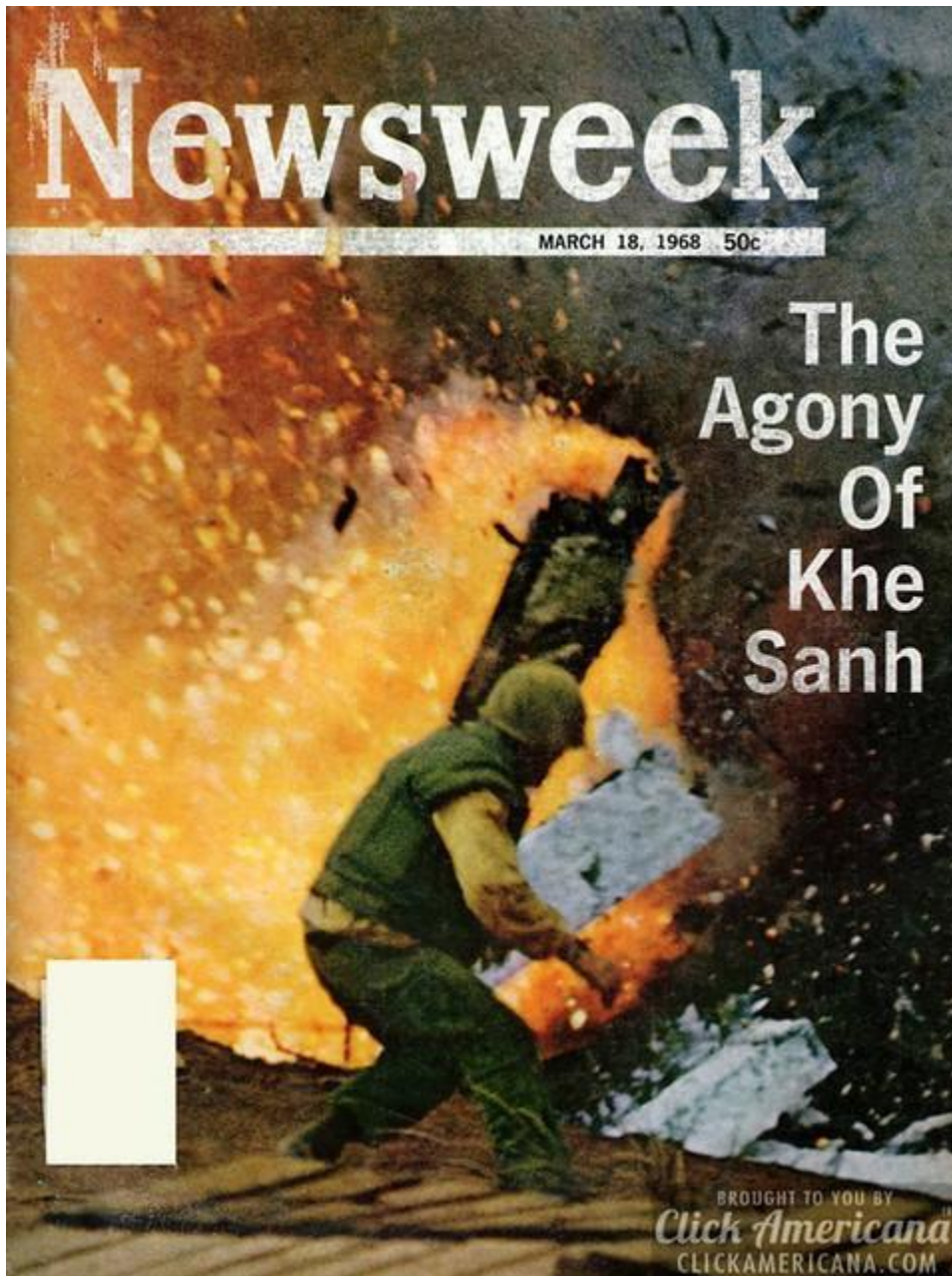


# "Chance of a Lifetime": Jacoby Photo Exhibit to Show Up-Close Look at Civil Rights Movement and Vietnam War

by Sydney Sinks, News Reporter  
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ALTON - Over 150 photos by Robert J. Ellison, a famous photographer during the Civil Rights Movement and Vietnam War, will be on display at Jacoby Arts Center.

The Hayner Public Library District has partnered with Lewis and Clark Community College and Jacoby Arts Center to sponsor the exhibit, which will open at 11 a.m. on Feb. 17, 2024, and run through March 27. The exhibit will include several famous and “eye-opening” photographs from the 1960s. Those who have curated the exhibit agree that it is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to see the Civil Rights Movement and Vietnam War up close.

“It was hell on Earth, and Rob was out there taking photos of it,” said Bo Jackson, Ellison’s cousin who has been working on the display for decades. “It’s just very graphic photos that you don’t see in the old Hollywood movies-type stuff. People get killed. It’s eye-opening...That’s why ‘unfiltered’ is such a key word for our display, ‘Unfiltered Lens.’ Where previously you would have censors and things like that, this is raw stuff. It’s pretty naked stuff.”

The Wisconsin Veterans Museum loaned 4,500 photos to Jackson, who worked with Lacy McDonald at Hayner’s Genealogy and Local History Library to decipher when and where the photos were taken. They eventually narrowed down the display to 180 photos, which were previously shown at Lewis and Clark Community College in August 2023 with the help of Jared Hennings.

The “Unfiltered Lens” exhibit starts with the 1963 March on Washington where Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his “I Have a Dream” speech. It ends in 1968 during the Vietnam War, with photos taken in the weeks before Ellison died at the age of 23 when enemy gunfire struck down his plane.

“Ebony” dedicated their entire April 1968 issue to King, who was assassinated a month after Ellison’s death. But the magazine made space for Ellison’s obituary, noting that he was “a young white man who lived as Dr. King hoped all white men would live.”

“Seeing the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War through one person’s eyes really shows you how intertwined these two historical events were,” McDonald said. “Many of the people in the photographs, including photographer Robert Ellison, could still be alive if not for the associated violence.”

McDonald feels “very grateful” for the chance to research and help curate the exhibit. She added that she has gained a better understanding of the connections between the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War and the present day.

“We’re carrying on the work that has been done in the past by the people that were working towards equality in the United States,” McDonald said. “It’s really inspiring because change can happen and sometimes it takes a long time and sometimes it takes a lot of work, but you’re seeing the people that have made change and it can be really encouraging for situations we’re dealing with now...This is history, but it’s really not that long ago.”

Jackson said the “Unfiltered Lens” exhibit is “a chance of a lifetime” to see the photographs and stories from the 1960s. He will give a speech at 2 p.m. on Feb. 17, 2024, and 6 p.m. on March 1, 2024, about Ellison’s work and his coverage of the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War.

Jackson has also sponsored a [showing of the movie “Rustin”](#) at the Alton NCG Cinemas movie theater throughout Feb. 16–23, and he encourages people to see the movie to provide more context for the photos. He thanks Sara McGibany, Alton Main Street, Carol Matteson and Great Rivers and Routes Tourism Bureau for their help and support.

“People forget how divided the country was,” he added. “The country was being torn apart. It was a very, very tough period, the early ’60s, and it was very divisive. And Rob captured that...His obituary recalls him as fearless. He definitely was fearless. He was like a Marine, ready to run into the fire, and that’s what Rob did. He ran to wherever the trouble was.”

The exhibit will open from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Saturday, Feb. 17, 2024, with an opening celebration from 2–4 p.m. that day. You can check out the “Unfiltered Lens” exhibit from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Wednesdays–Sundays until March 27, 2024.