

My Filmy: A Creative Nonfiction piece

Cierra Evans | May 2024

Honestly, I think photos and videos are just a part of my identity. I've been on camera since birth. No, not practically—literally. My birth is on a random VHS tape somewhere in my Nana's storage unit. She, along with the rest of my family, loved documenting our lives through camcorders and film cameras, with hundreds of photos and videos in boxes waiting to be rediscovered.

Although there's an entire photo album devoted to my birth that I love to look at, neither my mom nor I have ever seen the tape as it's locked away. My mom often complains about how she doesn't like that my Nana has it and how I need to get it. Ironically enough, I don't know if I want to see it just yet. Ever since I learned it existed, I always felt like that was something you do when you're like... 30... and the closer I get to 30 the more comfortable I feel with the idea, like a time capsule.

"Ci, I really don't understand why you don't want to watch the video of me giving birth, but you're fine with looking at the pictures of me in labor..." my mom mumbled as she noticed me flipping through the photo album in question.

"Ugh, Mommy! I never said I don't want to watch it, I just said I don't want to right now!" I said in a sarcastic tone. Like I said, that was something for 30-year-old Cierra to watch, not 14, or 18, or even almost 21.

I had such a strong infatuation with photo albums and documentation that I tried to take photos of everything around me in middle school when I got my first phone, an iPhone

4s. But being very young and rather irresponsible with storage conservation, most of those videos and pictures got deleted over time if they weren't already posted to social media. The cycle of take and delete repeated throughout middle school and into high school, with me slowly finding ways to not lose every picture like iCloud and Google Photos, but still feeling the need for a better way to capture.

When I started college in August 2021, a friend of mine took a few pictures of me on one of her film cameras. Each time she'd pull it out I'd think "God, I always wanted one of those." but the urge to buy my own skyrocketed when she showed me the developed pictures. One of me on the grass at the arboretum and another of me and some other friends at a block party. I was obsessed with how it looked, and decided that I wasn't losing any more memories. On a spontaneous weekend back home in October 2021, I purchased my OWN disposable film camera: a \$16 green and black FujiFilm QuickSnap. I vowed one thing with that purchase: These will NEVER be thrown out.

As I paid for the camera my mom scoffed "Uh, \$16 for that!? They were never that much."

"I want to keep my memories of everything like y'all did, Ma!" I replied, holding the camera close. "I promise it'll be with it, these will last."

And it did. I brought that little green camera everywhere—parties, hangouts, dinners at cafes, dorms, walking to class—you name it. It stayed with me, and even though I didn't always take a photo, my thought process was, "You never know when something might be worth capturing" With each of the 27 shutter clicks, I made the first camera stretch

from early October to late November 2021, getting it developed for the first time at a Walgreens back home in Baltimore.

Developing my film cameras has always been an easy drop-off, primarily because nobody seems to take pictures this way anymore—It's simple: you go to the photo desk, wait for a cashier to notice you, fill out a form, slide the camera into the package, and then wait about a week while you pray the photos come out right. My Walgreens is special because my exposures are done in four days instead of fourteen, take that Walmart!

The first time I went to pick up the exposures was with my mom was during Thanksgiving break in 2021. I was so excited to see what the pictures looked like because, over time, I'd forget what I even captured.

"Alright girly, let's see if they were worth the price" My mom joked as I tore open the package and began flipping through in the car.

I frantically looked through my photos to discover moments from my first parties, the decorations in my dorm, my first college boyfriend (yikes), the sunset, and more. Call me cocky but my favorite photo though was of myself in my Halloween costume—a pair of red devil ears with a black latex dress.

"Oh my gosh, LOOK!" I tapped my mom's shoulder. "Umm, definitely worth the price, thank you!"

She glanced over and smiled. "Alright Ci, If it makes you happy, I don't care. You'll be happy you have all those pictures in the end."

And I was—I am.

Spoiler alert—Buying these cameras became a hobby so of course I eventually gave it a nickname: *My Filmy*. It was silly, but this object held importance to me; it was primarily a capturer of my raw, unfiltered life. So, of course, I wasn't going to call her by her government name "FujiFilm QuickSnap Flash" or simply "My film camera." Hell no, this was *MY FILMY*. Even if she would be replaced every other month, the name remained.

Throughout college new friends looked at me confused anytime I said, "Oh shit, I forgot my Filmy!" or "WAIT! Y'all look cute, let me get my Filmy out." But once they became acquainted with her, they either wanted one of their own or simply wanted me to take pictures of themselves. When they asked to take solo Filmy pictures at parties or music video shoots, I was more than happy to oblige as the designated photographer friend I was.

Even though you only get 27 photo ops, I have never been stingy with the photos I develop or take. I didn't want to keep every picture I took because not every picture was just of me. Many times I'd take pictures of friends and give them the photos once developed. It became a mutual excitement anytime I let them know I was getting the photos developed, my friends just as eager as me to see them. Some even began to buy their own Filmys and asked me for help navigating how to use one.

My Filmy wasn't the only camera, or cameras, I had. Like I said, I became *THEE* photographer friend; I had a digital Nikon Coolpix, a Polaroid, and even an early 2000s video camera (Although I didn't plan on capturing any births). Even though I loved using them, nothing compared to how in-the-moment my Filmy was. With a Polaroid, you see

your photo in under five minutes, and with a digital camera like the Nikon, it's easy to delete any photo you don't like even though the quality is amazing. But what's so beautiful about film cameras, particularly disposables, is that you are forced to be in the moment with every photo you take. There's no instantly seeing what you just captured, and there's no editing either. In a world where we've gotten so used to taking a million photos and deleting them because we don't like a tiny flaw, the film camera *humbles* you...

And in my *humble* opinion, the exposures are arguably more beautiful and raw than any iPhone camera or Nikon could offer. Unlike the digital cameras, even if the photos are blurry, or if they don't come out right, I never hated a single exposure that came from it because my reality hits: THIS is what my life looks like, raw and unfiltered.

After nearly three years of documenting and hundreds of photos later, during my spring break I got a photo album to put each photo in chronological order from October 2021 to August 2023. Over 50 pictures from two more Filmys are still waiting to be developed. Once they are, a new photo album will be bought, the pictures will be stored, and the cycle will continue until the day I die.

When I finished carefully sliding each of the 200 something photos into each slot, I ran downstairs to the living room, stood in front of my mom with a grin and handed her the first full photo album without saying a word. Intrigued, she flipped through.

"Wow... you really stuck to your word, didn't you?" She said in awe

"I always stick to my word. Even when I graduate and move out, I'll keep creating memories and I'll hold onto these ones for my future kids to flip through and ask

questions one day—just like I do with you! Who knows, maybe I might have someone document my birth for me and my kid to never watch”

She laughed and looked up, a hint of nostalgia in her eyes. “Making sure the cycle continues, huh?”

I replied grinning, “One filmy at a time.”