

Local Photographers Captured Shuttle Disaster

Titusville shots provided vital clues to Challenger tragedy

By Kate Gilderdale
Stouffville Free Press

Paul and Monika Strak of Gridwork Photography established their reputation as exceptional motor sport photographers more than two decades ago, but their most memorable coup occurred Jan. 28, 1986, and it had nothing to do with auto racing.

The day before, the Lemonville couple had flown to Florida to cover the Daytona 24 Hours race. That was also the date that the space shuttle Challenger was due to blast off from Cape Kennedy. "I knew there was a launch that day, but it was scrubbed because of the weather," said Paul. On the morning of Jan. 28, the couple drove to Cape Kennedy in hopes of photographing the launch. "When we got there we discovered that the public were not allowed on NASA property without a pass, but we could watch it from the Titusville side, which is about five or six miles from the launch pad." They set up their equipment and waited. "I was all ready and started shooting on lift-off as the shuttle started to climb into the sky," recalled Paul. Then he discovered he'd run out of film, so Monika tossed him a new roll and he resumed shooting. "I checked the focus, fired off five or six frames, checked the focus again and fired off five or six more." When he stopped for a second to look directly at what was happening, he noticed that the booster rockets "were all over the place. In that previous burst of shooting the shuttle had exploded

and I caught it." On the radio he heard the NASA announcer say, "We have a major malfunction," and as he continued shooting he spotted a parachute, which at first made him think that some of the crew had bailed out, "but it turned out to be a booster parachute, which under normal conditions would drop back into the ocean and be retrieved and refurbished for another launch," noted Paul. "I said, 'I think it's blown up,' and Monika said, 'We've got to get this to the (Toronto) Sun.'" In the days before digital, there was no way of knowing exactly what Paul had captured, but the Sun photographer he talked to didn't want to pass up a chance for an exclusive shot, so he asked the Straks to ship the film to Toronto right away. Paul and Monika spent the rest of the week in Florida and flew home the following Monday to a slew of messages from Toronto Sun writers, one of whom asked Paul, "Do you have any idea of what you've got on film?" They went to the newspaper office to be interviewed and their photographs ended up on the front cover of the Toronto Sun, the Houston Post and the Washington Post. The Houston Post asked the Straks if they could release their photos to the Rogers Commission, which was set up to investigate the tragedy, and those photos eventually provided some vital clues about the cause of the explosion. As Monika pointed out, while some people think professional photographers are only interested in making a name for themselves by capitalizing on tragedy, "this showed

that good photographs can be instrumental in finding answers when things go wrong." And although they were initially disappointed not to get access to the official launch site, the Titusville location turned out to be a blessing in disguise, said Monika. "Because we were on a public access site, NASA couldn't seize our film as they had with those on the official site, and we were so far away that we were looking more at the side of the spacecraft. We would actually see the burn-through on the booster frame by frame." Had they been at the official site, they would have been shooting from underneath the shuttle as it climbed towards space and their view would have been obscured by smoke from the exhaust.

They were also approached by Aviation Week & Space Technology, the bible of the aerospace community, who wanted to buy the exclusive worldwide rights to their photographs for one week. "The reason they wanted our pictures was because our images clearly showed the cause of the disaster," Paul explained. Today Gridwork no longer specializes in just motor racing photography but has branched out to other areas such as commercial and industrial work, as well as a new division named "Speedy Dog" devoted to action photographs of - you guessed it - your dog. They also offer spectacular panoramic images from their travels around the world.

Their new website, GRIDWORK.CA, is currently under construction and should be up and running within the next couple of months.



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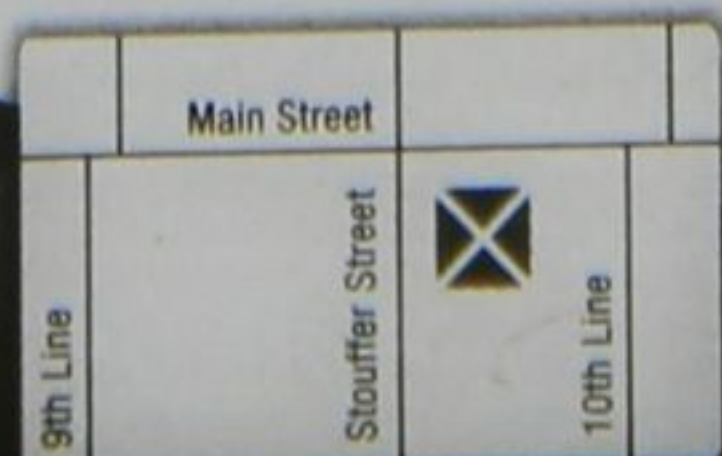
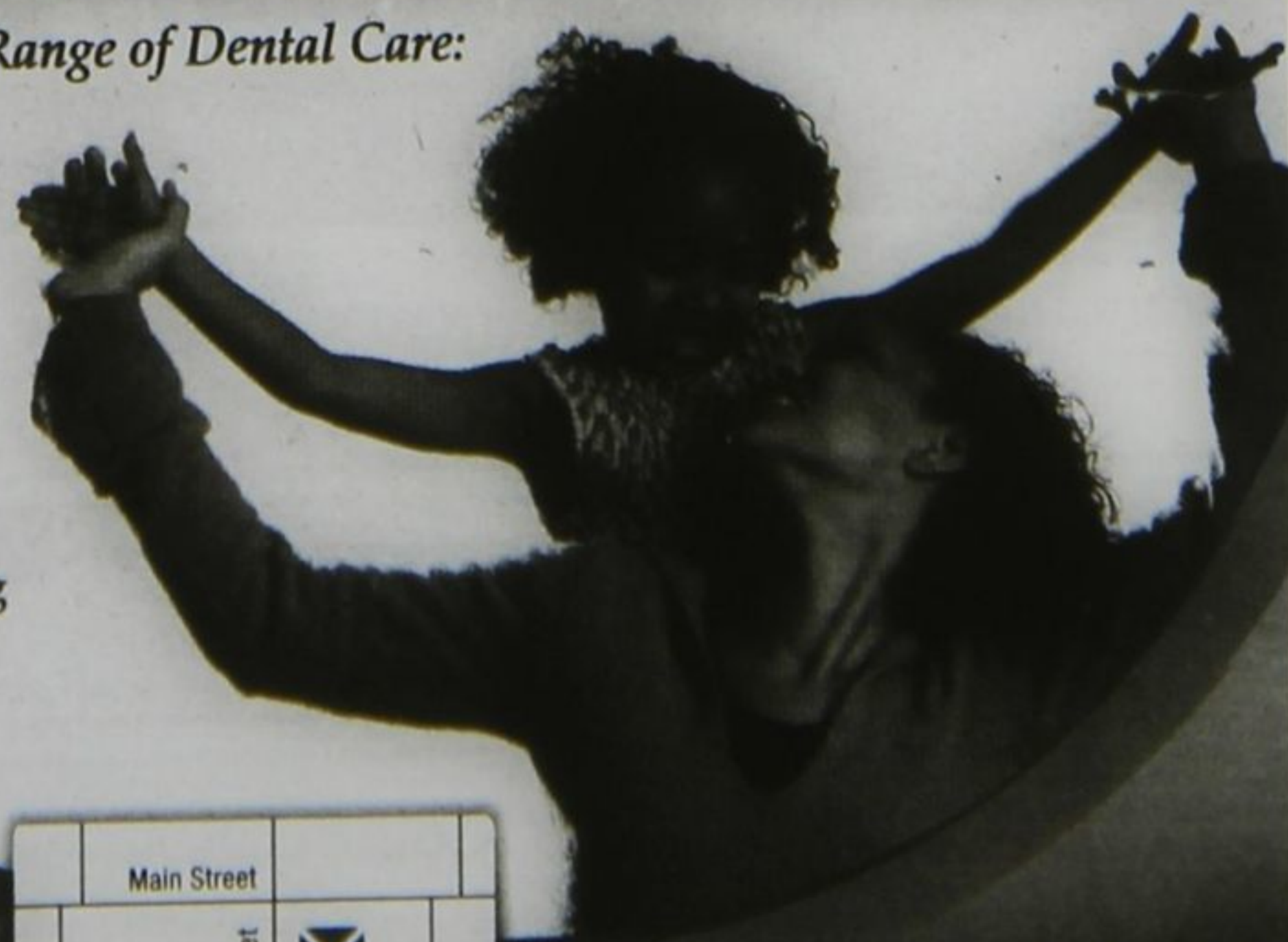
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Two of a series of shots that helped unravel the mystery of why the space shuttle Challenger exploded shortly after taking off from Cape Kennedy on Jan. 28, 1986.



Gridwork Photography photos



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