RIT’s Big Shot photography project first flashed onto the scene on a wintry Rochester night in December 1987. Since its inception, the project has hopscotched to several national landmarks and twice crossed the Atlantic Ocean.

No matter what the subject, the photo-making process yields a unique nighttime image and fosters a spirit of community among the hundreds of strangers, friends, children and adults who provide the guiding light.

This September, the project shoots for 25. The Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C., is the subject of the 25th Big Shot photo. Located along the National Mall just south of the U.S. Capitol, the curvilinear and domed museum has an exterior clad in Kasota limestone.

“From the moment Bill and I first visited the museum with family a few years ago, we thought it would make for a perfect Big Shot photograph,” says Dawn Tower DuBois, professor at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf and one of the Big Shot organizers. “What drew us to the structure was its unique architecture, the color and the texture of the stone, and the museum’s location on the National Mall.”

The longtime project organizers are a trio of RIT faculty members: Tower DuBois, Bill DuBois and Michael Peres from RIT’s School of Photographic Arts and Sciences.

On the night of the actual photo shoot, the DuBoises are behind the cameras perched on scaffolding while Peres is on the ground managing logistics and volunteers. All the planning and preparation can’t
What is a Big Shot photograph?

RIT’s Big Shot, often described as a “painting with light” photograph, requires many volunteers to help illuminate the subject area during an extended exposure. To make the nighttime photo, participants use flashlights or camera flash units to light the subject, while RIT faculty shoot the image.

Previous Big Shot photos can be viewed online at www.rit.edu/cias/bigshot/

Below-freezing temperatures welcomed in the first Big Shot at Rochester’s Highland Hospital in 1987. The Big Shot project began as an extracurricular event for the biomedical photographic communications department.

“We decided to illuminate a medically related subject,” says Peres, chair of biomedical photographic communications. “We picked Highland Hospital because it was near my house and we could go back there after the picture was taken to drink hot chocolate. For that first Big Shot, we only had about 75 volunteers. The students wanted to know where the next Big Shot was going to be.”

George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film, with its ties to photography and Eastman Kodak, was a natural choice for the second Big Shot.

The growing excitement and number of volunteers armed with flashlights each year solidified the Big Shot as a fun tradition that could draw in the community no matter its destination.

“While we were setting up for the photograph at the Ontario County Courthouse in Canandaigua (N.Y.), a woman pulled up in a car and asked if she could get involved,” says DuBois. “We said of course. She then showed us her keychain with a very small flashlight on it and said, ‘I’ve got my light with me.’ We’ve had stories like that with youngsters and adults who want to be part of it.”

The three eventually set their sights on national landmarks like the Alamo and the World War II Aircraft carrier the USS Intrepid. The Big Shot has gone international twice with the Presidential Palace in Stockholm, Sweden, in 2003 followed in 2007 by Dubrovnik, Croatia, the home of RIT’s sister school, the American College of Management and Technology.

There is no shortage of anecdotes. Due to freezing snow and rain, the DuBoises found themselves in a precarious predicament at the 1995 Big Shot inside Rochester’s Mt. Hope Cemetery.

“We were set up on a 45-degree slope to get the vantage point we wanted. Both Bill and I fell and started sliding down,” says Tower DuBois. “We were afraid we were going to take out the cameras so Michael used some rope and tied the two of us to a tree. That rope became our good luck charm. We decided we would bring the rope with us to every single Big Shot.”

The rope certainly came in handy in 2003, with the camera perched three stories above street level on an apartment balcony across the street from Sweden’s Royal Palace.

“We could have thrown the test Polaroid from the roof and watched Michael chase after it down below,” says DuBois, “but we turned around and there was the rope so we tied a knot and lowered it so he could see the print and we would know how to shoot the next two exposures.”

With the 25th Big Shot event on the horizon, what is the secret to its successful longevity?

“It’s great fun,” says Peres. “We make an image of something that has never been photographed in that way. And creating a sense of community is an integral part of the RIT experience.”

Kelly Downs