NARRATOR: It all started in 1987 with a community project, a handful of faculty, and 37 students. Now, the RIT Big Shot is a larger campus tradition than anyone anticipated. In this episode of Intersections: The RIT Podcast, get a glimpse of the history behind the RIT Big Shot, and a taste for the team's future plans, in celebration of a new exhibit, RIT Big Shot: 35 Years of Painting with Light. Michael Peres, Gannett Chair in the School of Photographic Arts and Sciences (SPAS), has worked on the Big Shot since its inception. He is joined by Dan Hughes, lecturer in SPAS, and Eric Kunsman, assistant professor in Visual Communication Studies at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, who will lead the Big Shot into the future.

DAN: Could you talk to us about the beginnings of the Big Shot and what it is?

MICHAEL: In May of 1987, I was finishing my very first year of teaching at RIT. So my chair, Bill DuBois, and I were analyzing the ups and downs of the school year. And we said, we need to build a community project. We need to build something that students could get their head around that was exciting. Then he said, you know, maybe we should do something like the Sylvania company used to do called the Big Shot. And so, we came up with this little project. Little did we know what was going to happen after that moment. And we sort of brainstormed. Since we were the biomedical photographic communications department, we had to photograph a hospital because that's what biomedical photographers did. We reached out to the Highland Hospital and said, hey, we have a crazy idea. We want to come to your hospital in the middle of the winter, we want to come there at night, we want you to turn out all your lights, we're going to bring students, they're going to bring electronic flash photography equipment, and we're going to take a picture using one camera over time. And they said, well, we can't do that, that's not safe. Little by little, we worked through some kind of resolution and set a date for December of 1987 and invited the students – there were about 37 of them total with one camera – and we did it. It was just a really great experience. The students had so much fun. It was like, we're going to do this every year from now until whenever! Who knew that would be the case? It was just sort of a lucky accident trying to build teams of students and community and solve complicated lighting problems with basic equipment. Those were sort of the fundamental principles that we were after. Eric, when was the first Big Shot that you attended?

ERIC: The first one I attended – I actually ended up also working the camera – was in 1999, the Intrepid.

MICHAEL: Number 13. And, Dan, what was your very first Big Shot either as a student or now as a faculty member?

DAN: My first one was Golisano (Institute for Sustainability), which would have been 30, Big Shot 30. So, I'm a relative new comer to the group.

MICHAEL: It's really wonderful to be working with you two because you guys are the future of Big Shot. And Bill, Dawn, and I started this little idea. And little by little things sort of grew on their own volition and it sort of became like Big Shot magic. And it just

kept growing and growing and growing. And after we did the Ontario County courthouse. That was our first road trip. And after we made that picture, Bill DuBois had gone out to dinner with some people from companies that were visiting RIT and he showed them the picture. So, this guy, said, “Bill, what are you going to do to top that?” And he said, “Oh, we’re going to do the Intrepid! We’re going to go to New York and we’re going to do the Intrepid.” That began our first, let’s bring the project out of the shadows. Because it was still a very regional project before we moved to the national stage in New York City. Tell me a little of your recollections of going to New York.

ERIC: So, I was across the highway on the UPS Tower where the cameras were set up. And I was running the Polaroid camera. And for that one a CNN crew showed up and was up there with us. It was my first Big Shot from the camera vantage. Seeing the magic from the camera, I think, is the best part. Unfortunately, not everybody always gets to see that. But, Michael, one other question is – can you speak to where the idea of taking four exposures came from. Which we are continuing. But can you explain why four?

MICHAEL: When we were using 4x5 film cameras and the project was film, you could put two pieces of film in each film holder. We would use Polaroid instant film as our test. So, we had one camera, black and white film, two film holders, and Polaroid. We used Polaroid as a tool to assess how long the exposure time would be because a lot in the beginning we just experimented. Are we going to get the right exposure? Are we going to make enough exposure to get an image on a piece of black and white film? So, the four exposures started from using two sheets per holder of black and white sheet film. And then we just sort of started to create little tiny traditions that made sense. So, ok, if we did four last year, we should do four this year. And we stayed with that because it challenged us to kind of challenge the students to get it right. So, the very first exposure with Polaroid was kind of our proof. We would look at the results and carefully analyze what parts of the picture received the right exposure and what parts of the picture received too much or too little, and were we lighting the right things. And each picture we learned a little bit more. So, the four pictures evolved from that very first one. But that’s sort of the beginnings of where four pictures came from. As you said, we’ve done it four pictures for 34 pictures now.

DAN: And I still try to get an image over to whatever media outlets we’re working with at the time by the 11 o’clock news. That’s another tradition that we have attempted to stick to.

ERIC: The Intrepid also we had to find a lab in New York City that we rushed off to with the film to have it developed and drum scanned because there was the big party on the Intrepid with Al Simone, the RIT president at the time, so we wanted it projected on the Intrepid. So, that was another big challenge – finding labs when we still had to work with film because we couldn’t go to the dark rooms at RIT because, now, we were in New York City.

MICHAEL: There were always problems to solve. Dan, do you remember any of the recent problems, say, from the Churchill Downs project or Golisano? What kind of problems do you remember us having to solve?

DAN: Well, now, shooting digitally we have some cool new opportunities to be able shoot with multiple cameras at one time. This opens up the ability to shoot much wider angles of view or with different or unique perspectives that are different than what could have been done in the film age and in film days. Yeah, I think at Churchill Downs we shot a 180-degree angle of view. But we shot it with four cameras. And what that enabled us to do was stitch a higher resolution image together. So instead of having one camera that sees at 180 degrees, we've got four cameras that are next to each other that each one kind of gets a slice of the area that it's capturing. That's another way that we've been sort of evolving the project. We've got really interesting, new kinds of technologies that we can implement, and one of those technologies is computational imaging or merging multiple pictures together to create one final image. And we've got to do that with multiple cameras because we have to shoot at one time. We only make four exposures. If you think about making a panoramic image with your phone, you basically hold the phone and move it as you go. But if you do that at night while there's 100 or 1,000 people helping you to illuminate the space, you can't be moving the camera around. You've got to capture everything all simultaneously. Some of those new things that we've got to do are figure out how to make cameras work simultaneously and then work with digital asset management so that when we've got our images we can very quickly do the post processing that's necessary to deliver the images on time.

MICHAEL: One of the fun things was dealing with color balance issues because every light in the spectrum was in these pictures. We'd have sodium vapor and we'd have neon and, oh, just everything. Tungsten halogens, electronic flash, so color was a real challenge to make the kind of neutral pictures that we'd hoped to. But then we just started to realize that we're making plans and then the picture would be the result. And all of our planning wasn't usually ever the result that we would get, but everybody would say, wow, that is fantastic, I've never seen it look like that. And that became sort of the goal, to create these pictures that no one had ever seen look like that. Always tried to find a unique point of view, light it in a new way, empower the students to have really important roles in the project. Because it was always about the student experience. The project has maintained that. Dan and Eric, I know you guys have been super inclusive of inviting students.

DAN: One of the things that Michael was talking about was planning. All of these different projects are very different projects. Most of the time we're working outside, we can't control the weather, we can't control who shows up and with what kind of lights. And, so, we plan and plan and plan for months or even possibly a year or two or longer and then whatever happens kind of happens the night of, which is terrifying and also just really fun.

MICHAEL: Why Big Shot has sustained itself for 35 years is the community. We have people who just really enjoy the process. And the Rochester community and the

university community and alumni communities have all really promoted what we do. They support us, they encourage us, they offer recommendations for future subjects. And they've really given us the energy to try to do new things and explore new boundaries.

ERIC: And also, because of social media, it's getting out there much, much more nationally and internationally. Hopefully, as we take the Big Shot out, more and more opportunities might come to us now because of the alumni, social media, and people finding out about the Big Shot.

MICHAEL: You know, we never wanted to do something we already had done – we did that, so how can we top that. Taking on Cowboys Stadium, taking on the Alamo, things that were a stretch for us. Each picture was like climbing our own Mt. Everest. We did that, so then what comes next. So, that will always be your challenges. That's sort of the reason for this celebration of the really wonderful exhibition that we've been working on mounting to sort of celebrate 35 years of photographs made this way that have involved people and places and alumni and celebrate, because they've never been displayed on the campus really before. And so, we're going to have huge prints. The prints will be 33 feet by 11 feet and 10 feet by 12 feet, massive prints of our favorites displayed in very unique ways. There will be some multimedia components, there will be some of the newspapers. We've been featured in the Democrat and Chronicle, we've been featured in the Chronicle of Higher Ed, we've been featured in the Washington Post, CNN has done a feature on Big Shot. All of this content that was kind of invisible to people we wanted to bring out into the university and celebrate 35 years. It's kind of a special tradition that the campus can help us make a photograph. And everybody plays a role. We can't make the picture without the people. And at night it's much like theater, you can light what you want and you can let the rest of it go into the shadows. You can change emphasis and you can change the way things look. The photograph is not truthful. People want to think that photography is truthful, but it's really an interpretive process. And I believe the project pushes the boundaries of what's truthful and what's possible by creating these huge still lifes made by participants. It's a participatory project. One of the greatest joys I find is when people go look at the picture and they say, I lit this part or I lit that part. Or, what did you do? And you can just feel the joy they had from that 30 seconds of doing something special.

ERIC: The idea of the theatrics – Churchill Downs, I think that was also a turning point where now it's almost more of a narrative where we had the racetrack workers' kids looking like the jockeys. The reenactors for the Lake Ontario Big Shot. The one for Wallace on Ice, we used the librarians and the hockey team. The idea of it almost becoming more theatric is something that will hopefully be happening in the future. Where else do you see the Big Shot being pushed in the future.

DAN: Just interesting new venues, I think. Offering opportunities to students to participate in the planning facet and executing and utilizing the cameras as well as being group leaders, I think is an important facet. And then bringing in more folks or different folks from various parts of the university. Facets of engineering to help us build

custom pieces of equipment to be able to fire cameras over a half mile distance or something like that, just as an example. How about you, Eric? What direction would you like to take the project in?

ERIC: It's what RIT's initiative is right now, the idea of technology, art, and design, which I think you struck on it right now. But maybe it becomes augmented reality. Working with different departments, what else can be added to the RIT Big Shot? How can it grow and become even more of an event rather than just one photograph? So, I agree with you on that one for sure.

MICHAEL: That's why I'm so excited you guys are driving. You guys have such unique and technologically driven agendas that who knows where you're going to go. Just push the boundary every time we do another one.

NARRATOR: Thank you for listening to Intersections: The RIT Podcast, a production of RIT Marketing and Communications. To learn more about our university, go to www.rit.edu and to hear more podcasts, subscribe to Intersections on iTunes, Spotify, TuneIn, or Soundcloud or by visiting www.rit.edu/news/podcasts.