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## Community



Photograph by Vicki Thompson

Inside his storage unit, local photographer Wes Billingslea holds up a photograph from 'Mexica: Keepers of the Fire,' his ongoing project to document indigenous populations.

### Photographer's first book shows his focus on indigenous cultures

By Mayra Flores De Marcotte

Wesley Billingslea is debunking misconceptions about the lore of ancient cultures, and featuring his photography along the way.

This month, Billingslea's first book in a series, *Lost Cultures: The Aztecs*, hit major bookstores around the world.

"I'm amazed," he says. "We've sold out of our second printing already, and there's a huge demand in Europe."

The books are the Willow Glen photographer's attempt to give the people showcased in the books a voice.

"No one is allowing these people to tell their own story," Billingslea says. "That is the point of the lost cultures series."

His book has made such a splash in the literary world that retailers including Barnes & Noble and Borders have agreed to carry the whole series.

*The Apaches*, *The Immigrants*, *Farming* and *Homeless* will debut beginning in 2008.

The path, however, has been long and difficult.

"When I first started out, I struggled and fought to get my photography into the fine art world," he says. "The industry has struggled to categorize me."

The photographer works alone and still uses conventional film for all his photos. He also works exclusively in black and white.

"I'm doing things on my own terms," Billingslea says. "It needs to be an organic process."

This bump in his creative road has also resurfaced in the publishing world.

After struggling with creative and factual differences, Billingslea decided to self-publish rather than altering his work in order to be picked up by a larger, better-known publisher.

"I'm not motivated for the wrong reasons. I have a responsibility to the people I am working with. It's a collaboration and the key is the common values, a shared vision and respect," he says.

Billingslea has been working with the descendents of the Aztecs for the past six years. To them, he says, a photograph is more than a paper image: A photograph that captures the subject's face is believed to also capture the soul.

Although the ancient civilization has not been in the public eye--and some even doubt its existence--there are about five million Mexica left in Mexico. These descendents live together, still practicing their traditions and passing on their history to the next generation by word of mouth. The Mexica speak, read and write Nahuatl, the ancient language of the Aztecs, along with Spanish.

The Mexica are trying to keep their heritage and language alive as modern life continues to affect their traditions.

Billingslea wants to document this struggle so that future generations can read about it and appreciate it.

As he continues his documentary work on this ancient culture, he splits his time between homes in Willow Glen and Culiacan, Mexico.

A percentage of the book's proceeds go to the culture it highlights, as well as to educational programs on Mexica history and civilization.

*"Lost Cultures: The Aztecs" is for sale at Barnes & Noble, Borders Books and Amazon.com.*

*For more information on Billingslea, his projects and photos, visit [www.wesleyimages.com](http://www.wesleyimages.com).*