

<https://www.rogerebert.com/festivals-and-awards/sbiff-2020-the-night-mentorstony-and-santi>

Among the most formative experiences of my youth was being introduced in elementary school to the mind-blowing photography of Lewis Hine, who chronicled the deplorable conditions suffered by young people in a successful effort to improve child labor laws in the U.S. Photographer Santi Visalli, one of the two titular subjects in [Andrew Davis'](#) **"Mentors—Toni & Santi,"** another notable gem having its world premiere at SBIFF 2020, cites Hine as one of the idols who motivated him to ensure that his own work would have a historical impact, preserving its imagery for future generations, much like the wet cement that enabled Michelangelo's paint to run deep into the Sistine Chapel. Sporting an integrity that would've made [Louisa May Alcott](#) proud, Visalli never relinquished the rights to his photos, even though he would've earned more money had he sold them to the respective publications that originally ran them, opting instead to make his visual documentation of world history accessible for students to study in universities. His belief that apprentices should begin working in the garden before the studio, in order to build an appreciation for the roots of what we so often take for granted, was taught to Visalli by his own mentor, renowned war photographer Tony Vaccaro. Deciding that he would take pictures in the same way that his abusive uncle hunted—shooting without aiming—Vaccaro sought to utilize a camera small enough to render his presence invisible, providing him with the ability to immortalize unfiltered moments stripped of all artifice.

Clocking in at 51 minutes, this affectionate profile is destined to be seen primarily on television, yet audiences lucky enough to catch it at festivals will have a rare opportunity to view many of the finest pictures taken over the past century on the big screen. What characterizes Vaccaro and Visalli's work, above all, is its overarching humanity, which can be observed not only in how they lens their subjects but how they approach them beforehand. When tasked with photographing Frank Lloyd Wright, Vaccaro refused to pose him and instead offered him a haircut. Aware of David Rockefeller's guarded demeanor prior to a photography session, Visalli loosened up the formidable banker by asking him about some of the cherished items in his office.

Visalli's philosophy that you must be as skilled a psychologist as you are a photographer in order to take a great picture also extends to the filmmaking of auteurs like Davis, whose love of spontaneity inspired him to stage an unscripted chase sequence during Chicago's massive St. Patrick's Day parade in his classic 1993 thriller, ["The Fugitive."](#) Rather than allow "Mentors" to devolve solely into biographical exposition, Davis includes various endearing vignettes of his subjects' behavior, such as when ordering their favorite Italian dish at a restaurant or engaging in witty banter (Visalli quips that having Vaccaro as his wedding photographer was like hiring Picasso to paint the bathroom). Yet it is during the film's opening sequence where Davis most poignantly captures the 60-year bond between these friends and collaborators—separated in age only by a decade—as they reunite for the first time in what feels to them like an eternity. Davis holds on this moment long enough for us to see the tears forming in their eyes, as the warmth shared between these men emanates from the screen and enters our souls.