

Ira Sachs, Filmmaker

This writer-director is contributing his distinct vision to help change the portrayal of families in the film world.



Ira Sachs' work explores the challenges and rewards that accompany familial exchanges: His latest film, *Love Is Strange*, is a multigenerational epic set in cramped New York City apartments, and he's currently filming *The Silent Treatment*, a movie about two boys who stop talking to their parents. In addition to his film work, he also runs two mentoring programs that nurture creativity in the next generation of gay creatives. We talk to him about the ways community extends beyond blood ties and how his perception of family changed when he started creating his own.

What was life like for you growing up? — I was born in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1965. My parents divorced when I was three, so my two older sisters and I were raised by our mom, but we also spent a few nights a week with our dad. In a way, it was a situation that mirrors my own as a parent at this point in my life, as I'm raising two children with my husband, and their mom lives next door to us, so we also co-parent.

Is there a particular aspect of family life that you're interested in capturing for your movies? — I'm interested in the conflict between being an individual but being part of a community, and that includes the community of a family: You're always trying

to balance your own personal needs with those of the larger familial group. That creates real and dramatic conflicts in terms of balance for each of us. I'm also really questioning the definition of family in my films. Is it the family you're born into, or the family you choose to make as an adult? It goes beyond blood ties and into something that's really about love, and questioning the nature of love. Much of *Love Is Strange* is about how we're sort of constructed by the family that surrounds us: The film begins with a wedding between two men, which is kind of the endpoint of a long struggle. They share that celebration with friends and family, but that community doesn't exactly embrace them in such a full way. Our sense of self is heavily impacted by how others treat us, and as a gay man, I used to be more interested in being an individual because I didn't find a space for myself within the larger family unit. But that has shifted over time, because as the culture has shifted, so has my sense of self within a family.

The two leads in *Love Is Strange* are older gentlemen. What can we learn from older generations? — The film is mostly about the ways that one generation influences another. I hope the film encourages people to be aware of the temporality of our lives. That's a useful thing within our families—to

realize that whatever conflict is at hand, at some point it will be over and that there will be another generation taking that space. And having that kind of perspective maybe allows for greater empathy for each other.

The film also deals with life transitions. What was it like transitioning from living on your own to introducing a whole family into your life in a short period of time? — I went from living alone in my apartment to living with my husband, our two kids and their mom over a weeklong period. Every Sunday night the parents [myself, my husband and the kids' mom, who now lives next door] meet to talk about the week and our relationships in order to try and understand the things that might go unspoken. Because we're not a nuclear family, we need to have really conscious moments for conversation. I find that's a good thing—it's created a good kind of philosophy of how to be parents, as we try to talk about things as they come up. When I was growing up, especially as I became an adult and got involved in romantic relationships, I was never successful at speaking the truth about what was going on. And now I'm at an age where that's very important to me: to speak about the things that are difficult and to speak about the things that are joyous. **KET**

Rachel LaCour Niesen, Photojournalist

The founder of Save Family Photos discusses her efforts to preserve other families' memories.



Save Family Photos, a virtual campfire where people can gather and share their stories online, has allowed Rachel LaCour Niesen to merge her interests in both personal and world histories by curating a selection of intimate family images from around the globe. Earlier this year, she took over *The New Yorker* photo department's Instagram account for Mother's Day, where she uploaded a series of photographs of family matriarchs with accompanying stories. She speaks about how her own family inspired her project.

What was your motivation for starting Save Family Photos? — I'm lucky to have two 91-year-old Southern grandmothers who love telling stories. These two women have both breathed life into my project. My Mississippi grandmother has a large, wood-paneled wall of family photos. As a child, I used to walk along that wall and stare at my family's faces. I saw my grandparents as children, my father graduating from high school, my uncle as a student in New York City, my aunt at a swim meet. I saw faces full of hopes and dreams—long before I ever existed. In those moments, I realized something powerful: My story started before me. When my grandfather died a year ago, I wanted to celebrate his life. I started scanning old photos of him,

then I posted a photo and story about him on Instagram and invited family and friends to do the same. Now I've received more than 10,000 family photos and stories from around the world!

Why is remembering to remember so important? — Remembering means much more than just jogging your own memory: Really remembering requires recounting memories over and over and over again. The tradition of oral history, of sitting around a campfire and sharing stories, is often overlooked in the digital era. It's slower. But it's what makes memories last for generations, not just for a social-media minute. When we take time to talk about our photos, we give them deeper meaning and context that can be passed along in the form of stories. Family stories make our futures richer by making our roots deeper.

What can families do to maintain their archives? — It's easy to feel overwhelmed when you think about the total number of family photos gathering dust in your own attic or basement. Just choose one photo and ask a family member what they remember. One is enough. Soon you'll discover that one leads to 10 and more family members will want to get involved. Then it's no longer a chore—it's a collaboration. There's

no convenient time to preserve your family history—just start somewhere.

Please tell us about your own family. — As a Southerner, I grew up surrounded by stories and oral history. We love to talk. In fact, we talk so much that my Midwestern husband was totally overwhelmed the first time he had holiday supper with us! We can't get enough of a good story, whether it's ours or someone else's. That's probably why I love curating other people's family stories—I'm always drawn in as if it were my own family.

How did your family encourage you to be creative? — I was a curious, creative, unconventional kid. Whenever I felt like I didn't fit in, my Mom would gently say, "Normal is a cycle on the washing machine." It reassured me that—no matter how quirky I was or how unusual I felt—"normalcy" was relative, maybe even irrelevant.

How can creativity be found in noncreative fields? — I think we're all born with creative energy. The real challenge is finding your medium and embracing it. Once you do, you'll never look back. I love this quote from Jackson Pollock: "When I say 'artist,' I mean the one who is building things—some with a brush, some with a shovel, some choose a pen." **REL**