

# Local News

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## New London photographer highlights city's 'great' women



Brenda De Los Santos, a New London photographer, talks with boxer Madeline Pettey, 13, as she takes her portrait on Wednesday, October 2, 2019, at Whaling City Athletics in New London. De Los Santos has been working on a personal photo project, "Small City, Great Women" highlighting accomplishments of women in the New London area who might not normally receive notoriety. (Sarah Gordon/The Day)

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New London – Having been born and raised in New London, Brenda De Los Santos was always aware of the exceptional people living in what she calls “this unique and wonderful little community.”

The 35-year-old photographer and owner of **Brenda De Los Santos Photography** has now set out to highlight some of those people and bring their stories to the public. She’s doing it one woman at a time with a project called “Small City, Great Women.”

She began the project in April to profile in words and photos the strong, diverse and passionate group of women living, working or volunteering in New London who are not so accustomed to the limelight or recognized for their work. Now posted on her website, the diverse profiles include a foster mother, a coach, an educator and a chef, among others.

“It’s been very interesting talking to these women. They’ve been so different,” De Los Santos said. “They’re all doing something good for other people because it’s a good thing to do and that resonates with me. I’m happy to shine a light on them and some of the cool things they’re doing.”

De Los Santos provides a link on her website, [www.brendadelossantos.com](http://www.brendadelossantos.com), for people to suggest women she should photograph and has dozens of worthy women to consider.

So far, there's been a common theme among her subjects — giving back.

One profile subject is Chelsea Phillips, a 26-year-old coach who started the New London Youth Lacrosse program in 2015 and two years later started coaching a girls' lacrosse team at New London High School despite minimal funding from the school district.

Phillips volunteers her time coaching at the high school, works full time as a project manager for a construction company and recently earned a master's degree from Columbia University.

De Los Santos said Phillips is additionally urging high school girls to use lacrosse as an entry into college.

Another profile subject, 35-year-old Erika Gradecki, is a mother and owner of Food For Your Soul, which offers private in-home meal preparation, party and event services. Gradecki offers children's cooking classes and camps and adult classes through local park and recreation departments and New London Adult and Continuing Education.

Photographer La Chale Gillis, another of the "Great Women," is caring for her parents and volunteers her time taking photos at the New London Talent Show.

And the list goes on.

De Los Santos herself fits the mold of some of the women she is profiling. Along with her thriving business as a portrait photographer — she doubled the size of her State Street studio earlier this year — De Los Santos has made it a point to get involved. She can be found volunteering her time at any number of causes, including Help-Portrait and Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep. Now I Lay Me Down To Sleep is an organization that enlists professional photographers to conduct intimate portrait sessions with parents experiencing the death of a baby, "capturing the only moments parents spend with their babies."

De Los Santos said she signed on after speaking to her sister — Angela Donovan, a labor and delivery nurse at Lawrence + Memorial Hospital — about a mother who experienced a stillbirth. There were no local photographers who were volunteering at the time to capture in photographs a parents' only moments with their child.

"I felt a wave of guilt. I could be doing something to help. I have the ability to do that," De Los Santos said.

She signed up, was accepted as a volunteer and shot her first portrait in the hospital a few months later. She said she found the idea of the work was intimidating but worth it. She is now the area coordinator for southeastern Connecticut with the organization.

De Los Santos said her volunteer work is some of the most rewarding. With Help -Portrait, a movement whose mission is to take and give out portraits of people, she has been involved in events that have benefited the United Cerebral Palsy of Southeastern Connecticut, The New London Homeless Hospitality Center and Safe Futures, which serves women who are the victims of domestic violence or sexual assault.

As part of an event with Safe Futures, De Los Santos said she was teamed up with a make-up artist to help some of the women "feel beautiful." She shot photos of more than a dozen of the women and delivered framed photos to every subject.

De Los Santos is also a member of the board of directors of Fiddleheads and a mentor to a 15-year-old girl as part of her work with Nutmeg Big Brothers Big Sisters.

A 2006 graduate of Boston University with a degree in photojournalism, De Los Santos initially was considering a move to a big city. After all, she was among the high schoolers living in New London who had said to herself, "I can't wait to get out of here."

But after some work as a newspaper photojournalist after college, De Los Santos came home to New London and in 2014 started working on her own business full time. New London, she said, is where her family is.

She has seven nieces and nephews in the area and sees at least one of them once a week, helping out her two sisters as much as she can.

Her latest profile in the "Great Women" series is of 13-year-old Madeline "Maddie" Pettey, a seventh grader at the Interdistrict School for Arts and Communication (ISAAC). De Los Santos met Maddie recently at the Whaling City Athletic Club for a photo shoot.

Maddie is in her third year training as a boxer, doing something De Los Santos said that is helping to shatter stereotypes.

De Los Santos said she will continue her work on the project as time allows and had tinkered with the idea of a gallery show to display all the women "for the women," or even a book someday.

“For people reading these stories, I think just hearing about the good in the world is something nice and uplifting. There are so many not great things we hear on daily basis. It’s a little bit of a counter to that.”

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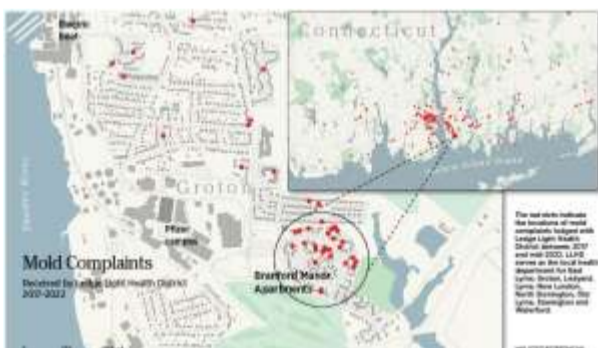
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