



John Augustine Echave

May 5, 1946 – June 12, 2024

HE WAS A TALENTED AND COMPASSIONATE MAN with a powerful presence that filled a room. That is why it's difficult to accept that on June 12, 2024, the world lost a remarkable person, John Augustine Echave, who succumbed to idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis.

Born in Havana, Cuba, John came alone to the United States to avoid being sent to the Soviet Union for socialist reeducation. At 15 years old, he found himself a refugee who didn't speak a word of English.

Most think of John as a photojournalist and photo editor, but he started in broadcast journalism at WTHI-TV and WISU Radio in Terre Haute, Indiana, where he interviewed Louis Armstrong, Johnny Carson, Abbie Hoffman, Dionne Warwick, and

many other influencers of their time. In 1970, he went to Columbia University as a CBS News Fellow. There, Margaret Mead's anthropology class left a lasting impression. Following Columbia, he opened his own photo agency: Echave & Associates.

Rather than business, however, John's true passion was journalism. In 1979, he took a position as a photo editor for the Associated Press. In 1982, he became the foreign picture editor for *US News & World Report*. There, he worked tirelessly to get ahead of the better-funded *Time* and *Newsweek*, even purchasing a seat on the Concorde supersonic airplane for his film to travel from Europe so he could have the images before his competitors. Then, in 1988, he became an illustrations editor for *National Geographic* magazine, where he was later promoted to senior editor.

On assignment for *National Geographic* in 1990, John returned to Cuba for the first time in nearly 30 years. In writing about his return, he lamented how “nothing had changed, yet everything had changed.” Though it was very difficult for him, he continued to travel to Cuba—completing seven *National Geographic* stories about the island nation over more than a decade.

While producing an article on Mexico, John realized there were so many profound images that he convinced a skeptical editor in chief to publish an entire magazine on the country. Within a few days of publication, not a copy could be found.

John was dedicated to passing on his vision of photography as its own language, more soulful and with greater impact than the spoken or written word. He excelled at mentoring and developing photographic talent. For more than two decades, he was a professor of photojournalism at The George Washington University in Washington, D.C., and taught workshops from Finland to the Philippines. He supported the careers of many budding as well as established photojournalists. He would say that he had the pleasure of working in “the Major Leagues,” musing about his relationships with the Jackie Robinsons, Lou Gehrigs, and Babe Ruths of photography. Many already had successful careers, and John helped them perfect their art. They include such renowned photojournalists as Kate Brooks, Anna Clopet, Karen Kasmauski, Tim Laman, Jesus Eduardo Lopez, Steve McCurry, Matt Moyer, Norbert Rosing, Joel Sartori, Anup Shah, and Maggie Steber. Upon hearing of John’s passing, a colleague remarked: “Some people change lives for the best. John was one of those people.” Longtime friend Maggie Steber remembered John this way: “What he gave us went beyond the photograph. He taught us to be better people, not just better photographers. He made us better human beings in many ways. He taught us how to care about the people we photographed. That was the great gift that John gave us.”

During his tenure at *National Geographic*, John published 217 articles, including 37 cover stories. One editor in chief wrote that John was “the most productive editor ever in the history of the magazine.” He shared numerous National Magazine (Ellie) Awards with other magazine staff. His career was filled with multiple honors, including repeated awards in every editing category of the Picture of the Year Award from the National Press Photographers Association.

Following his departure from *National Geographic* in 2008, John started a company with sons Christopher and Matthew to produce independent documentary films. They worked together in Iceland, Mexico, and the United States. Titles such as *Iceland’s Mastro Geppetto*, *Nací Cirquero*, *Grandma Is HIV-Positive*, *Rímur: Iceland’s Epic Poems*, and *A Grassroots Movement* have been screened at international film festivals. Working closely with his sons was John’s most cherished achievement.

John was a true Renaissance man, a Hemingway scholar who also had a special connection with elephants. During production of the May 1991 *National Geographic* cover story “Elephants: Out of Time, Out of Space,” the editor in chief called John “the Jesus Christ of elephants.” John was a volunteer docent at the National

Zoo and worked closely with the elephants. Even after life became so busy that he had to quit his hobby, he continued to visit Asian elephants Ambika and Shanthi, with whom he had bonded. They would eagerly run to greet him when he raised his hand and called. On several occasions, he took his grandson to visit the elephants. Ambika and Shanthi always ran to them, lifting their trunks and smelling their scent in greeting. He grieved their loss when they died within four months of each other in 2020.

Beyond his gift as an elephant whisperer, John was also a polyglot. He loved languages and spoke Spanish, French, and English flawlessly. He loved to dance with abandon. “Cubans learn to dance before they learn to walk!” he frequently said. He loved life and lived it to its fullest through dance, music, travel, literature, art, photography, and his family.

Wanting to impart his love of the world and its people to his sons, John spent his summers traveling with them. Together they explored Alaska, the American Southwest, Canada, Cuba, Iceland, Mexico, and many other places. During one particularly memorable trip, the trio walked for an hour through the Mexican jungle in search of an archaeological site that a *National Geographic* researcher had suggested John show the boys because it was still densely covered. The directions were a bit garbled, and it was 100 degrees (and surely 100 percent humidity), but in John’s inimitable fashion they persevered to finally find several extraordinary Mayan pyramids. Chris and Matt referred to that day with tongue-in-cheek fondness as “the Yucatán Death March,” and so it became known in family folklore.

John met his soulmate, Anna Kerttula de Echave, in Alaska, and after a decade together, they married in 2003. She survives him, much to her great sadness. He is also survived by his son Christopher Echave and daughter-in-law Emily Echave of Maryland; his son Matthew Echave and partner Darrah Wills of Washington, D.C.; his brother Vincent Echave and sister-in-law Cho Thanda Echave of Montreal, Québec, Canada; his nephew Pablo Echave of Sherbrooke, Québec, Canada, and niece Vanessa Echave of Geneva, Switzerland; his godson and cousin Gonzalo Sanchez of New York City; his cousins Silvia Maria Sanchez Kaminsky and Miriam Sanchez Fromenta of Miami, Florida; and his cousin Vivian Sanchez of Englishtown, New Jersey. Deeply important to him were the grandchildren he left behind: Joseph Maxwell Echave and Megan Laurel Echave.

John Echave’s talent and vision were pivotal in shaping photojournalism in the 20th and into the 21st century. He was adored by many, feared by a few, and gave 100 percent of himself to his profession and his real passion: his family. Having lost his native home as a teenager, he made a home wherever he was—a man of the world and for the world. His family, friends, and admirers offer these words of love: “Bless you, John! You are not gone. You are eternally with us. We are your legacy!”

In lieu of flowers or donations, Anna asks that you follow the example of this sensitive and kind man: “Hold your loved ones close, remind them how beautiful they are, and tell them how much you love them—every day. John would have liked that!”