

"WITHOUT A NET"

As I begin to write I am wondering about the legacy that I am leaving behind. What will be felt when my work is viewed, critiqued or just passed by? I can think of the many people in my life who had a profound impact on my ability. But did they really change my vision? Of course my teachers, friends and colleagues have influenced me, but where is the line drawn? Over the years my photography has grown and changed, but I can truly say that I am responsible for my successes and failures. I am sure that what I have completed is mine and mine alone.

How many talented photographers have had the door slammed in their faces because someone, somewhere, felt that they lacked skills? That kind of negative reinforcement can either be damaging or enlightening. I remember an instructor in community college who once told me that I would never make it in photography. My reaction was not rejection, but resolve! How can one person pass judgment and determine the course of one's career and/or life? Let him be damned! At the same time I have tried to learn from that experience and move in a positive direction. I have used the experience many times in the lectures that I given and the courses that I have taught.

What do I have to give as a photographer? I can share the love of my art, the way the world looks to me in my viewfinder. I can let others look into my world, into a life that I believe was created for a reason. No one should allow another person to deter them from their purpose in life.

I am a second generation Eagle Scout. The process of attaining the Eagle rank involves not just the acquisition of badges, but the learning of new skills, life

experience, and the development of leadership. I remember when I received my Eagle badge, I pledged to give back to Scouting by helping to develop the leaders of tomorrow. I have also made this same promise to photography. For years I listened and learned, and now it is my responsibility to share with my fellow photographers. I only hope that I can give back as much as I have received! We, as artists in the photographic medium, must remember that we are responsible for the documenting of time. We capture reality, and we must do it with style.

THE FOUNDATION

How did I get into this profession? The process began during my junior year in high school. It seemed a career as sports writer was the ideal way to make a living. But it soon became apparent that I didn't have the experience or writing skills I needed. As I recall, my journalism instructor, who was also the yearbook and school paper advisor, asked me one day to take the football team photographs. "What! Do you want photos or a story?" I felt that maybe I could take better photographs than I could write, so I jumped into the unknown. All I knew about photography was related to my Brownie Starflash camera. "Can I use my own camera? You want me to use a Speed Graphic and it's what size????"

That same day was to be my first encounter with a professional photographer. So that I would not betray my fear to my advisor, I asked a fellow student, whose father was a photographer, for help. I'll never forget that day or the man that helped me, Stan Geech. He had the patience of a saint, while he tried to orient me to this huge thing called a press camera. Somehow I managed to operate the camera and more importantly learned how to use the 4x5 film packs. How did the photographs come out? Well..... some of them were used, but to even say that they were acceptable would be stretching it. On the bright side, a new spark was lit within me and that spark has continued to grow. From that point on I was

focused and determined. To be able to take a complex piece of equipment and capture a moment in time at my choosing seemed infinitely challenging and interesting.

During my senior year in high school, I began to realize that the camera and film were just the first steps. The darkroom was where the image really came into being. I convinced my parents that the space in the basement could be put to better use if I could put in a darkroom. Another photographer, Al Smetona, gave me the necessary equipment and I was on my way. I can recall weekends spent in the cold, damp room with lots of light leaks, sometimes forgetting to eat or sleep. During one long session, a mouse ran up my pant leg, but it only added to my determination to overcome all obstacles to becoming a photographer!

Toward the end of my final year in high school, I was introduced to a photographer in Laguna Beach. His images were beyond my abilities, but not my vision. He was a true artist in the sense that he used more than a camera, film and paper. He used his imagination. As it turned out, I was the last student of William Mortensen. Mr. Mortensen gave me the chance to explore my own imagination. He was not a joiner, but he was so well-respected that just the mention of his name was a great foot in the door. To this day I continue to read his books. His style, developed in the 30's, is going through a rebirth in the 90's. His techniques formed the foundation of what was to be my love affair with photography. To this day I can hear him say, "If the image is in your mind, getting it on film is easy."

As I reflect on that time in my life, I can see where the real love of photography was born. My family life was somewhat dysfunctional. My mother suffered from chronic depression and it was all that my father could do to keep the rest of my family together. It was during this time that I used my photography to create a new existence. The generosity that the professionals I had encountered showed

an untrained but eager beginner contributed to my philosophy that to give back to one's own profession is the greatest legacy.

I graduated from high school and received a scholarship from the PTA to attend Brooks Institute of Photography. But it was three years before I finally got to Brooks. I wanted to complete the Bachelor's in Fine Arts, which required two years of general education before the photographic portion was to begin. For one year I worked to support photography as a hobby. I photographed some weddings, but that was not where my heart was. The experience was certainly valuable as I learned to deal with other people who wanted to buy my images.

I attended community college for two years, and I continued to explore other photographic areas of interest, which allowed me time to mature. I took several classes in photography and began to see that it held career potential for me. At one point I was considering skipping Brooks, as I felt that I had all the skills I needed! It still amazes me that I really thought I could make a career for myself at that point.

My time in community college was a very difficult time for me. I had to overcome my urge to break out on my own, and instead, buckle down and listen to those who were there to teach. Most of my time in school was a positive experience, but I had difficulty with one instructor. This instructor taught me a very valuable lesson. Through his very negative attitude, I learned that compassion and patience is the better way. He was the instructor who said I would never make it in photography.

I entered Brooks in October of 1967 and a whole new life was opened to me. For the first time I was given the opportunity to get a formal education in photography. I was prepared to learn, but I also thought I was somewhat of an expert already. I was already shooting weddings, some portraits, and I had

several of my sports shots published. It was my first time away from home and I was on my own. What could be better?

That first six months at Brooks was hell. It took that long for me to understand that I was not the expert. I was just a student who was there to be open to seeing new ways, not sticking to my way. I almost did not get through that first year. The reality of life on my own, and the complexity of photography showed me how much I needed discipline and maturity. I would not change that experience for anything.

The two instructors who had the biggest impact on me were Herb Bogie and Boris Dobro. I thought I was being singled out by them and I was right. It was their way of waking me up. I remember one very traumatic day when I wanted to run as far away as possible, and I asked Mr. Dobro why he always picked on me. His response will stick with me for the rest of my life. It was the wake up call that I really needed. He said “You have great potential, but you are lazy.” His words hit right between the eyes, and I knew he had pinpointed my weakness. He added that he was hardest on those with the most promise. The rest of my time at Brooks was a great experience as I began to realize how much I wanted to learn.

Setting goals has always been an important part of my life and career. Upon graduation, I wanted to set a goal that would give me a chance to show my skill and talent as a photographer. Finding an outlet for this challenge was not easy. After graduation, I was fortunate just to have a job. Many of the graduates did not have any idea where they would go. As a graduate of Industrial/Commercial studies from Brooks, I was determined to work in the capacity of a photographer in the space program. I was hired by Martin Marietta in Denver, and given an opportunity to work in a non-traditional position as a photo-optical engineer. I was part of the team that designed the film vault for the Skylab mission. It was

during this time that I was assigned to the Kennedy Space Center in Florida. After the film vault was designed, I was assigned to the team that designed the cameras that would map over 80% of the earth's surface from earth's orbit.

While I was working to determine the effects of radiation on various types of aerial emulsions, I was able to examine the hand-held cameras designed for space flight. While they were basically the same that we used every day there were modifications that set them apart from the Hasselbads and Nikons with which I was familiar. This experience was have a profound effect on my career.

The space program was completing the first manned landing on the moon and I was training the same Astronauts in procedures of documenting crew movement in space. It is hard to explain the feeling of training an Astronaut to take photographs. They were taking the most incredible images yet seen by mankind and here I was giving them instruction on how to use the various cameras and emulsions that were to fly aboard Skylab.

What really surprised me were the questions about earthly photography. "How do I get better pictures of my children?" or "How do you use a polarizer?" These highly trained people were using specially modified cameras, taking pictures that most of us would trade anything to be able to have made ourselves, and I'm getting questions on taking better snapshots! The astronauts were very capable photographers, they were trained to do a specific job and they did it very well. The chance to work in such a highly scientific arena gave me a very strong technical education that would be very hard to come by in any other field of photography.

Upon my return to Denver in 1973, I became the senior photographer in the Photographic Department at Martin Marietta. I held this position until December

of 1975, when I resigned to take a position with Fuji Photo Film USA and moved to California. I've been with Fuji for over 18 years.

ONWARD AND UPWARD

Shortly after I accepted the position with Martin Marietta, I received a notice of a photographic convention to be held in Colorado Springs. While this was not my first exposure to the PPA, it was my first chance to show my work through print competition. This experience proved to be somewhat traumatic, yet very satisfying. Although as an industrial photographer I was a small minority within a primarily portrait/wedding group, I found the association inspiring. The education was endless, the members were very helpful and considerate, and the experiences would shape my philosophy as a photographer and a print judge.

It was at this convention that I received my first exhibition merit and learned about the degree of Master of Photography. The degree became my goal. I set my sights on being a Master by the time I was 30. I spent many hours talking to photographers that held the degree. Picking their brains and discussing photography was an exhilarating experience for me, and thinking about those times is very important to me now. While I may not have agreed with all those that I came in contact with, I used the information and their philosophy to give me direction and strength to bring to film those faint images banging around in my head.

The one photographer who had the most impact on me was Ed DeCroce. I did weddings for Ed for about 4 years. While he wanted the work to reflect the style of his studio, he let me experiment. The results were not always to his liking, but he did give me the chance. We would spend hours going over my weddings. He would take the time to critique my work and give me the opportunity to express

myself verbally and photographically. I am sure that I was a pest, but Ed had patience and was willing to put up with my search for my own style.

As I look back, this experience was not to make a great wedding photographer out of me, but I learned a special discipline that will guide me for the rest of my life. I miss him greatly, but he lives with me every time I pick up the camera. For that, I cannot thank Ed enough.

THE HIGHS AND LOWS OF COMPETITION

A question that I have asked over the years is, “How has print competition affected my photography?” Of course I can reflect on my successes, but not all the experiences were positive. Although I had enjoyed the stress of deciding which prints I was sure would make that magic number, I was not prepared for the disappointment that I would feel when, in my opinion, my favorite print(s) would not score anywhere close to a merit print. I found myself working on images that would satisfy the judges rather than myself. What was I accomplishing? I was getting better at making competition prints, but were they images that satisfied me? This answer is easy.....NO! While some of the prints were very good, many were nothing more than compliance with the, “If you want to hang a print, you’ll have to do the following” rule. I experienced a frustration that I know many other photographers have felt.

But complaining without striving for change is pointless. My personal solution was to work to become a print judge. It was another chance to give back. I was determined not to find myself in that same position of saying the same old things about expression, sunsets and so on.

One other concern of mine is the undefined score of 79. To me the basis of a good judge is the ability to use the full scoring range to make a clear evaluation. I have chosen, as a judge, to not give a score of 79 to any print. It is very easy to assign this score if you are afraid to “get off the fence.” I take the risk to give the image the benefit of the doubt! If the print is close without any other problem, why not bump it up? If a judge feels strongly about the print, it should be scored accordingly. It is a cop-out to say or think great or poor comments and then give a score of 79. Judges must be honest with themselves, and with the photographer.

In print competition, honest criticism is invaluable. As a competitive photographer, I want to hear what can make my photography better. As a judge, I want photographers who listen to my comments to know that I am being honest and that I care about how they feel. I can remember judges who spoke using disparaging remarks that did nothing but cast a negative pall over the print, the photographer and the judge. We can be constructive and positive at the same time. It is easy to make the same comments that the other judges make, but it takes courage to speak the truth.

How has print competition helped me? In the first year of my competitive career I probably did more listening than anything else. One individual who really stands out is Kurt Jafay. At the Rocky Mountain PPA convention in Colorado Springs, Kurt took time (lots of time) to walk through the print exhibit to talk about the display. His compassion and love for photography was shared without reservation, and he left a lasting impact on me. He welcomed me into the profession, and I still value his philosophy and friendship.

MY PHILOSOPHY

I can name many individuals who have helped me, but those who have probably helped the most are photographers whose names I do not know. All of the prints that I have viewed or judged are the images that have had the most impact on my life. I know that there are no secrets in photography, but the process of using new ideas to create a unique style is very individual. As I see new ideas, old ideas, techniques, imagination and creativity in the work of others, I often feel so stimulated that I can hardly wait to experiment with my camera. It inspires me to “push the envelope” of what I have seen.

What is my style? I guess that’s a question that could have a different answer each time it is asked. I try for that image that stands out from the rest. I know that impact is the key ingredient and without it, the image is just exposed silver on a piece of gelatin. I look for that little something that will spark some of my neurons and give me that extra bit of creativity.

Music is as fundamental to me in creating an image as a piano would be to a composer. It helps me to previsualize and infuse emotion into my photographs. I have an appreciation of a broad range of musical styles which enhances the variety of photography that I enjoy. Whether an aria or rock, symphony or jazz. each piece of music has an important place in my creative process.

In my mind, I cannot truthfully say I am a commercial photographer or a photojournalist. What I am is a photographer of life! I love all aspects of photography and I know where my weaknesses are. This is all part of my learning process.

My short term goal is to improve my portrait skills, as there is something about the face that intrigues me. The eyes are the gateway to the spirit. Regardless of the texture of the face, the eyes are the key. There is something about the soul that I find truly exhilarating. Not only is the soul of the subject important, but the

soul of the photographer is also essential. I have always studied the great painters and artists. How many times have they attempted to create without that inner soul? I use their works of art as examples of what I try to create with the camera. Their use of light to create texture, and color to create emotion are the tools used to capture the soul on canvas. I attempt the same process with film and camera.

The ability to use all formats is important. During the four years it took to get my Master of Photography degree, I used at least 6 formats to create my images. Some formats are better suited to particular applications. For instance, it would be hard to shoot a football game or any sport with a large format camera, e.g. 4x5 or 8x10. I do see some photographers using medium format cameras, but very few. What is important is that you are comfortable with whatever format you choose, so that the camera becomes an extension of your thinking, rather than an obstacle to overcome.

PHOTOGRAPHY AS A MOTIVATOR

Sports photography is the most challenging photography that I have ever encountered. For the most part, it is a battle of frustrations. As a photographer you are there to record an event, but you have no control over what is going to happen. Some sports are easier to photograph than others, but being in the right place at the right time is more luck than anything else. The ability to anticipate is critical. Trying to photograph an event that you do not know anything about will lead to a basket full of unusable images.

Most sports photographers are avid sports fans. Events such as football require running up and down the sidelines carrying heavy lenses and several cameras. If

you are really lucky, there are maybe 10 to 12 images that you can use. This is after shooting 25 to 30 rolls of 36 exposure film.

I have heard people say, “How difficult can it be? Using a motor drive guarantees a good shot.” Well, I can say that I have filled a lot trash cans with discarded images. Like any other form of photography, it is the person behind the camera that will make the real difference. This may sound a bit egotistical, but it is true. Just because someone owns a camera, it does not mean that they are a photographer.

Auto racing photography is my first love. As a little boy I knew the make and models of all cars. I was able to continue my love of cars through photography. My first attempt at photographing cars came when I went to a track in Riverside, California. I didn’t have anything longer than a 135mm lens, but I didn’t know any better. The results were pretty poor, but they were the first of thousands and thousands to come. I have photographed everything from INDY Cars to Formula One, and my enthusiasm continues to intensify over the years.

As part of the photo team that makes up the staff of the Long Beach Grand Prix, I am challenged each year to make the photographs look different. Finding new locations and using techniques that imply speed is difficult. I have used pans, blurs and jagged motions to create effects. The desire to find something different is always there. Lenses from 16mm to 600mm are used and carried around the track. Photographing auto racing is true therapy for me.

THE 1984 OLYMPICS

Probably the biggest highlight of my career to date was the opportunity to photograph the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles. It was the opportunity of a

lifetime. To be one of the 500 photographers that converged on Los Angeles from all over the world was an experience that I will remember forever.

The biggest challenge was that I would have to schedule the events so that I could capture the event and be able to get to the next venue. Sleep became a non-issue, as getting to events was the most important objective of the day. My goal was to capture the spirit and excitement of the Olympics in my images. Over the 16 days, I exposed 500+ plus rolls of 36 exposure chrome and negative film, which amounts to over 18,000 images.

The conditions that were afforded the photographers were less than spacious, but that was part of the challenge and effort. In the bigger events, such as track and field and the gymnastics events, photo positions were not much bigger than the space occupied by your feet. The photographers were several rows deep with those bulky big lenses poking each other in the head or arms. All were attempting to maintain a friendly relationship under stress, while trying to meet their assignments. Shooting into the sun was common and the techniques of protecting images from the flare gave new purpose and meaning to programs that were sold to the spectators and ended up as lens shades! All were waiting for hours for the split-second when the victor crosses the finish line in exhilaration. At that moment, a roar erupts from the crowd and is accompanied by the high-pitched buzz of a multitude of motordrives, resulting in a great sense of satisfaction for the photographer, or the ultimate in frustration if the moment is lost.

The second biggest challenge was the editing phase. With the processing provided and great working areas, a rough edit could be done each day. The real editing came after the games were over. I can safely say that I spent several months going through the images and many landed in the waste basket. It was a time to be brutal. Those images that were poorly exposed or soft were the first to

go. Next into the trash were the images that did not convey my goals of spirit and excitement. Already I have thrown away several thousand images. Long lenses and a motor drives do not guarantee excellent results, but motor drives do afford the opportunity to capture those subtle moments that may not be seen. The events happen so fast that the instant of winning or losing is lost in the blink of an eye.

As I look back nearly 10 years, I have treasured memories of friends, events and the overall Olympic experience. My purpose in life as one who captures time with a camera is richer and wiser for those wonderful 16 days in Los Angeles during July of 1984.

A RETROSPECTIVE

During the years I've been with FujiFilm, I've been able to work in many different areas of sales and marketing. However, the most important revolve around photography. I am very involved with the use of images created by me and other professionals in advertising, trade show displays and technical publications. Because of my experiences working in the professional arena as a photographer, judge and association president, I am able to work with other photographers on a special level. I can relate to their concerns and situations because I care so much about the profession. As Manager of Photographic Services, I strive to infuse understanding and compassion in the process of providing services to professional photographers.

My own perspective of photography has changed several times over the last 17 years. The year after I received my Master of Photography (1977) degree, I went into a slump. To this day I am not sure why, but I do know that it was a difficult time for me. I was 29 and I may have felt that I was finished. I pondered whether

or not I should write an article on “The Plight of the Young Master”. I got as far as a rough draft and then realized that I had nothing to say. Whatever was going on in my head, I had to come to terms with it.

When I realized that getting the M.Photog. degree was only the first step, I knew that I had to be working on goals. Not necessarily major goals, but little ones that I could set for the day, week or month. In the process of this realization, I was getting involved with the local groups and the state association. This became a release for me and it worked as therapy.

Getting involved with these organizations was just what I needed. To give back to the profession, I made myself available to studio owners and freelance photographers looking for advice. After serving as President of two associations, I felt that I finally was on my way to the personal satisfaction that I was seeking.

During this time I began to look into my ability as a photographer. What did I want to do? What were my goals and philosophy? First of all, I knew that the only way I could attempt to satisfy myself was to do the photography that I wanted to do. I realized that there was a unwritten rule about a “formula” for print competition. Photographers were shooting only for competition and trying to adapt their images to fit the formula. I decided to continue to enter competition, but on my terms. Surprisingly, I was more successful than I expected. I think that this was due to my desire to work on my own creativity.

I am very proud of earning the M.Photog. degree. I am now in the company of a number of talented and creative individuals, but I feel that as I earned it, I was following rather than guiding. In the years since I received the degree, I have experimented with various techniques that in some cases did not work, but I learned from all of them. Some of the ideas I tried probably wasted time, but some were very rewarding. I was not afraid of trying something different.

How did I deal with the issue of “What do I do now?” I probably created a bigger problem than was necessary, but I needed to look inside for the drive that motivated me during the previous years. Coming to a new understanding was the best thing I could do for myself.

Over the years I have received many awards for my images. I was honored to receive some that came from outside the associations that we are most familiar with. The most important, for me, were the awards that came from my peers within the photographic industry. While the awards themselves are appreciated, they are not the final word on success. I continue to work toward improving my photography and looking for growth. The most notable award that I have received is the 1993 ASP Gold Medallion.

Nearly 20 years ago I started to compile notes on ideas for photographs. I got this idea from a photographer from South Dakota who said “Be careful or you will fill up lots of note card files.” He was right, and I have taken to putting the ideas on anything that I can find. After all these years, I cannot find many of the notes, but some of the stronger ideas are still bouncing around in my head. Many times I have been stuck in traffic and or just didn’t have a camera handy and found myself staring at that perfect scene. What did I do, while saying those unintelligible words under my breath? This is the time to take notes, even if they are mental, and make some attempt to remember them. The purpose of the notes is not to duplicate the scene or pose. Their effect is to stimulate and inspire as the new image is created.

WITHOUT A NET

Why do I say "Without a Net" and what does it mean? The title was very difficult. During discussions with my wife, we tossed out ideas that may or may not have related to my work. It became apparent that the style of my photography was without specific dimension.

I find that I can accomplish tasks and take risks with a camera that I might not otherwise. Would I have gone to the top of the Golden Gate Bridge without a camera?.....NO! In that moment of decision, as an out of control race car hurtles toward me, I think of safety, but wait until the very last minute, get the shot and then run. Finding that the best camera position is at the edge of a cliff or on the roof of a skyscraper, I am more concerned about getting the image than I am about my well-being.

I remember moments when I was working at Kennedy Space Center and I had to go through training where I was to evacuate the launch tower. Who in their right mind would leave a perfectly safe environment and slide down a zip line into a dark hole? What I won't do for the love of photography.... and I'll do it without a net!

I only wish that I could go back and recapture some of those photographs that eluded me. I hope that I will not fall victim to mediocrity and insecurity. I must remember that photography is my vocation and avocation. I want to create images that please me. I look back on my career and life with many happy memories. Above all, I want my children to pursue their own goals as I provide love and support for their decisions.

A net can be seen as safety, but it also means a barrier to going farther. How many times have we stopped short because we didn't want to take a risk? Many times an important breakthrough will be made by taking that extra step..... without a net!

