

KURT BREWER HAS A WAY WITH SENIORS

LOU JACOBS JR.

Kurt Brewer has been a professional photographer specializing in seniors, portraits and weddings for over 20 years. The last 14 of those he has spent in Salida, Colorado, where he and his wife, Monique, run a successful business. Kurt's loft studio is located in a historic downtown district and is adjacent to galleries and retail spaces; his photographs are displayed through the street-side window. In our interview, Kurt discusses his successful approach to photographing seniors in a county of 17,000 people.

LJ: Let's begin with a little of your career background.

KB: When we moved here to the mountains in 1983, we opened a portrait studio in our home in Buena Vista. As the local economy grew, we moved our studio to its current location in Salida, where we've been now for 14 years. Up until early in 2003 we used medium format cameras, then made the switch to digital. We haven't looked back.

LJ: How do you promote your studio to attract clients?

KB: For seniors, we concentrate on direct mail plus a series of posters placed in schools throughout the year. For weddings, we co-sponsor a bridal festival with a local bridal boutique, and we network with other wedding vendors, including a couple of photographers in Colorado.

LJ: How did you initiate yourself to shooting digital?

KB: I want to plug my dear friend and colleague, Grant Oakes. He conducted a series of "digital powwows" that were instrumental in helping me understand the workflow challenges associated with digital photography. After buying my first cameras and running extensive orientation tests, I invited a few high school seniors in for complimentary sittings and put the cameras and computers to the test. In a few weeks, I felt familiar and comfortable with my equipment and with processing images.

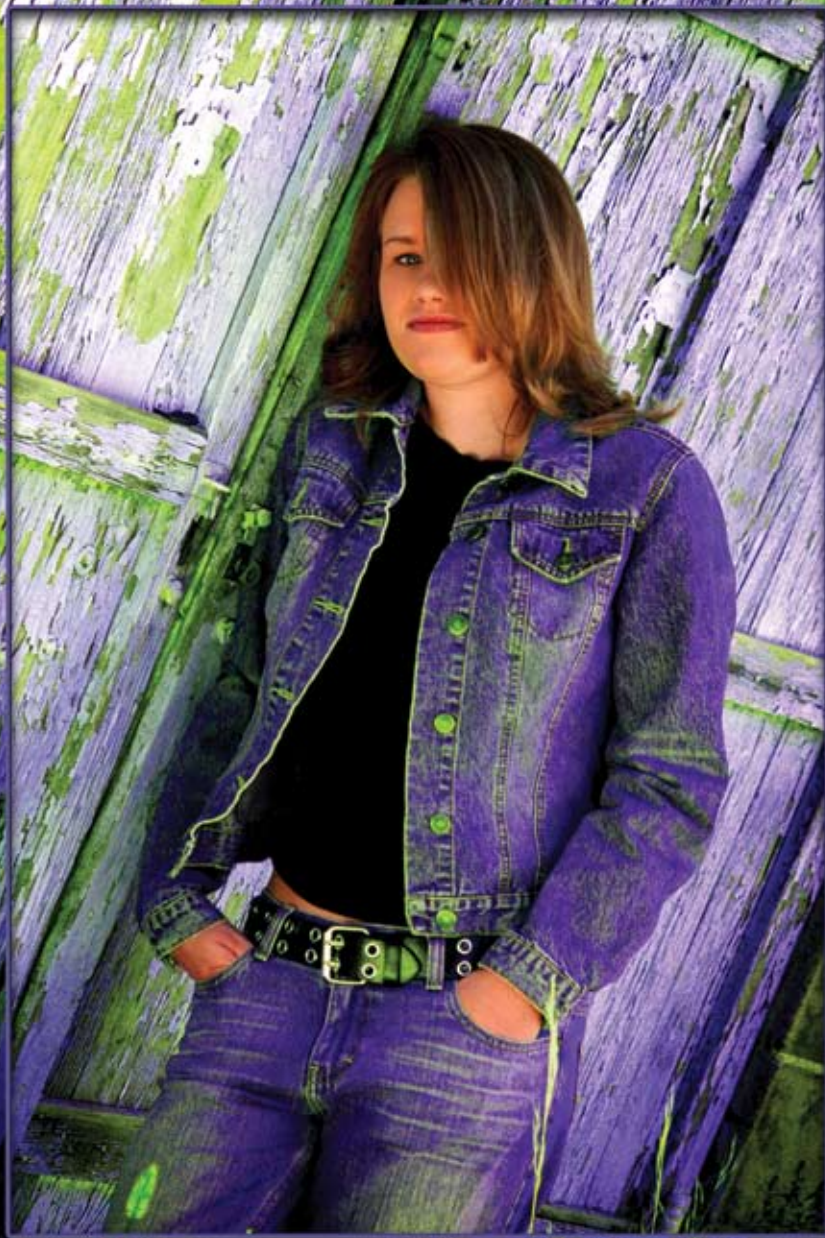
LJ: Is your approach to seniors different than it is with adults? I'd like to know your philosophy about working with seniors in general.

KB: Very different. I spend more time with high school seniors than with any other clients (with the exception of wedding clients of course, who are not studio projects). We usually schedule about two and a half hours with each senior. This gives us time to establish a rapport with them, put them at ease, with time to change clothes and travel to several nearby locations. We encourage the kids to bring both formal and casual clothes to the session; the more the better. We help them choose four to six outfits for the session.





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One of Brewer's senior posters

LJ: How is your approach to photographing adults different than seniors?

KB: With adults and families, we try to be as swift and smooth as possible, keeping in mind that most of those involved probably don't want to be there. If we can make it relatively brief, it's a more pleasant experience that they won't mind repeating in the future.

LJ: Please explain how you present pictures to your clients.

KB: We use a digital projector and laptop computer to project a slideshow, created using WnSoft's PicturesToExe, onto

a 30x40-inch stretched canvas. We often synchronize the slides to pleasing music, and after the show we use Kodak ProShots to edit the images one by one, cropping and making small improvements. This step generates the orders.

LJ: What have been some of your discoveries in the past few years that make working more efficient and profitable?

KB: The creative control that digital offers has increased production time considerably for each job. However, the time is more than compensated for by larger orders and increased referrals from satis-

fied clients. Slideshows have also become a very popular product. We make the slide displays available on CD or DVD, and Wild Iris Studio, our studio name, is easily remembered because CD and DVD covers promote us.

LJ: Do you make all proofs and prints in house?

KB: We no longer offer proofs since going digital. If clients want to take images home to make decisions, which we strongly discourage, we burn a CD slideshow that is programmed to expire after one week. This prevents orders from languishing on the shelf.

LJ: When do clients see actual prints?

KB: Print orders are generally filled within seven to 10 days. To restrict the time our computers are online and to avoid the risk of viruses, we prefer to burn a CD and ship it to our lab, Northwest Professional Color in West Fargo, ND. For rush orders we print in-house on Epson printers. We anticipate making our own prints more often in the future so we can offer same-day service.

LJ: Has digital made photographing weddings more pleasant?

KB: Yes! Not only do we tend to shoot more, but digital offers greater control with every image. Again, the only drawback is the increased post-production time. But showing digital slides is so superior to just showing print proofs, and we're getting paid better for weddings, and that compensates for the time. Photographers switching to digital need to be more conscious of the time spent for each client so it's priced into the product.

LJ: Is it helpful to view your results while shooting a digital wedding?

KB: It's a big advantage. We've tried to avoid developing lazy shooting habits by maintaining the same precise exposure awareness as we did with slides and negative films. But immediate feedback is a pleasure when experimenting with a different lighting setup or when shooting without flash in low ambient light.

I usually carry four to six 512MB storage cards, which hold about 900 images in fine JPEG mode, and I probably shoot about 500–600 images at an average wedding.

LJ: Do you increase prices regularly, and did they rise with digital?

KB: We sit down each year and analyze our costs, lab charges, rent, insurance and other expenses. We factor all these along



with an hourly rate we pay ourselves, and these become the primary basis for setting prices. Additional labor time for digital and the need to continually upgrade both hardware and software indicate when we have to raise our basic print and package prices.


We have generally two categories of clients: local ones and those from more affluent areas on the “front range,” the Denver, Colorado Springs and ski resort areas. In an average year, we’ll shoot about eight weddings locally and about 12 more throughout the state. Our average wedding charge is around \$2600 (less locally and more when we have travel and incur lodging expenses). Prices may often be set to fit the clients involved.

LJ: How is wedding post-production different than it is for portraits?

KB: When we first meet with the bride and groom, we sell them an album package. After we shoot the wedding, we create a slideshow as we do with seniors. About two weeks after the wedding, we invite the bride and groom back to the studio, where we use Kodak ProShots to drag and drop the images into an Art Leather album template. Occasionally this results in the album increasing in size from the original

order. Usually after a couple of hours, the newlyweds leave with a fantastic slideshow to share with friends and family. Within four to six weeks, their finished album is ready. We also keep a small line of Art Leather albums and GNP frames in stock to accessorize wedding orders.

Kurt Brewer works hard and shoots smart, and he enjoys his clientele—both young and old. Kurt says, “Working in a

small community presents many challenges, but the rewards are truly great. We’re not just developing lifelong clients, we’re also cultivating lifelong friends.” 

Lou Jacobs Jr. is the author of 30 how-to photography books, the latest of which is How to Start and Operate a Digital Portrait Photography Studio (Amherst Media). He has taught at UCLA and Brooks, is a former president of ASMP national, and has also written and illustrated numerous books for children. He enjoys shooting stock during his travels in the United States and abroad.

