



dan brouillette

from science to senior portraits
(an unlikely start in professional photography)

By Michelle Perkins

College is supposed to be a learning experience, and what Sioux City native Dan Brouillette learned when he arrived at Iowa State University in 2002 was that he didn't want to be a biologist. "I hated it," he laughs. What captured his imagina-

tion much more was the software on his graphic-design-major roommate's computer—Photoshop and a variety of other imaging programs.

"I started messing around on the computer doing composite work with Photo-

shop," says Dan. Early on, most of his imaging projects involved automobile modifications, which he entered in Internet competitions. It wasn't long, however, before he got sick of working on other people's photos and wanted to take his own.



"I saved up money that summer, and in the fall I bought a high-end Sony point-and-shoot digital camera and started taking images of my friends' cars," he says.

In the middle of his sophomore year, it became clear to Dan that he was interested in photography as more than a hobby. Since it was only offered as a small part of the fine arts program at his university, however, Dan decided to switch his academic major to something he liked (psychology) but continue working on his own toward making photography his career.

His first break came early in 2004, when a friend of the fami-



ly needed senior pictures for her daughter. "I had a friend who was trying to be a model," Dan says. "I had messed around taking pictures of her, so I showed them some of her pictures, and they liked them." For that first session, he went out with his Sony point-and-shoot, his dad's laptop and a 32MB memory card. "After every twelve shots, I had to stop and download the card to the computer," he laughs. "When the session was done, I edited it down, gave her about 20 images to choose from and charged her \$40 for the whole thing."

Apparently, the shoot was a success, though—people saw the images and Dan received



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calls from three more local seniors looking to book sessions. So, he saved up some more money, invested in a Nikon D70 and practiced some more with his model friend. Dan then shot his next three senior sessions for \$150 each, giving each them a CD of photos as their final product. “Now I look at them and laugh, but I guess the images turned out all right in their eyes,” he says.

Dan’s first fledgling sessions inspired him to buckle down and do some self-education. When he returned to school that fall, he turned to the Internet and books, reading everything he could get his hands on. By the time the next summer rolled around, he was a little wiser about attracting clients. He printed out postcards, obtained student directories from the local high schools and sent out a hundred-piece mailing. “I ended up booking 30 seniors,” Dan says. He also decided it was time to begin formalizing his training—and meeting some other photographers face to face. In June, he signed up for a workshop with the Mid-American Institute of Professional Photographers and ended up studying with Gary and Pam Box. (Ironically, Pam had been the photographer to take Dan’s own portraits when he was a senior).

“At the end of the week, Gary and Pam were kind enough to invite me down to their studio and their home for three or four days—just to show me the ins and outs of a studio, studio lighting, posing, running a business, all that stuff,” says Dan. “They helped me a ton—I think I had over 20 pages of notes.” When he came back home, Dan shot those 30 seniors he had booked— “with terrible pricing, like everyone starts out with!”

he laughs. These early sessions were shot mostly on location, but Dan also bartered senior photography for the use of some interesting space above a local garage. It was about 100° in the summer, but it allowed him to give his clients a few quick interior images before completing the session outside.

After his success in booking those 30 sessions, Dan was inspired to put together a more sophisticated mailer and sent out about 500 copies the next year. “I ended up booking about 50 seniors, so that was another step up,” he recalls. “Then I went down to the Boxes’ place again—they’re like my photography parents. Pam and Gary changed all my pricing so I’d actually be making money and helped me realize why things have to be priced the way they are.” It’s a lesson Dan is grateful to have learned early—before he gained a reputation for being “the cheap photographer” in town.

Continuing to work on his photography while completing his class work, Dan completed his degree in early 2007 and decided the time had come to open his own studio. He returned to Sioux City, a market of about 100,000 with five high schools and affordable rent, and began work on a studio that is slated for completion later this summer. The studio will offer a variety of services; Dan enjoys photographing children and would also like to start shooting a few weddings each year.

Naturally, senior portrait photography will continue to be a big part of his business. Not far out of high school himself, Dan enjoys working with teens and finds it easy to relate to them and what they want—both in their images and in the experience of being photographed. “I have them fill out a



questionnaire before the session so I know a little bit about who they are and what they like,” he says. The questions include their favorite band (which he’ll have playing when they arrive), their favorite beverage (which will be stocked in the fridge), and their favorite magazines (a quick way to figure out their personal style). Dan then spends about two hours with each senior, limiting the session only by time, not by clothing or scene changes.

So, while Iowa State may have lost a biology major, the world of senior portrait photography has gained a bright new face. With appealing images that reflect his own interest in fashion, a solid foundation in the skills required to operate a business, and a likable personality that clients connect with easily, Dan Brouillette’s name is one you’re likely to be hearing for years to come. To learn more about Dan or his work, visit www.danbrouillette.com or check out his blog at www.danbrouillette.typepad.com.



Michelle Perkins is a professional writer, photographer, and digital-imaging specialist. She has written for PC Photo and is the author of numerous books, including Professional Portrait Lighting: Techniques and Images from Master Photographers (Amherst Media, 2006) and Professional Portrait Posing: Techniques and Images from Master Photographers (Amherst Media, 2007).

