



Location, Location, Location—Redefined!

CHRIS NELSON

By CharMaine Beleele



Do you catch yourself taking every high school senior client to the same little park around the corner from your studio? Do you lean them against your favorite tree? If you are constantly doing this, you might be ignoring chances for lucrative success in the senior market. Chris Nelson of Fall Creek Portrait Design in Eau Claire, WI, credits his success with high school senior photography to the famous three words, "Location, location, location!" And no, he does not mean the location of his studio. He is referring to the vital importance of on location shooting for the high school senior



market. Chris scouts for unique settings with the dedication of a feature film producer who hunts relentlessly for the perfect backdrops for movie scenes. He said, with a grin, “Seventeen-year-olds are very anxious to make a statement about who they are, and if you can help them express it artistically, they love you for it.”

To become the trendsetting senior studio in your area, Chris suggests that you analyze what your competitors are doing. You will probably find that very few studios offer a wide menu of unique places for seniors to pose. Chris’ use of different locations has distinguished his Fall Creek Portrait Design from other Wisconsin photographers and is a serious selling point to potential clients.

According to Chris, there are a number of incentives for you to study your community, negotiate with landowners and establish some good sites for on location senior shooting. First, shooting on location will make you a better photographer. “You



will learn how to shoot in different situations because, unlike the studio conditions, you cannot control your environment.” This will prevent your “shooting style from getting stale.” Next, says Chris, “making arrangements to take seniors to unusual locations has branded my studio, and I am

convinced it can brand yours.” Finally, and perhaps most importantly, “You will give your client a more individualized product, something very personalized, which only your studio markets.”

Chris advises that you should expect that property owners will require proof of

proper insurance. He had to add a minimal amount to his business insurance premium to guarantee his policy covered him on location, but it was a small price to pay for the business that his unique locations have brought him. "If you contact your insurance company, they will send you a certificate of proof of your insurance coverage. Show this to the land owner when you negotiate a fee for the use of his place."

Chris is confident you can find settings in your area similar to his choices. He gives eight tips for scouting your community to find "location, location, location" success. View each of these scenes and more on his "Design Your Session Worksheet" (available on his website, www.fallcreekphoto.com, under the "Senior Gallery" section) for seniors to print and fill out before they book their session.

Scouting Tip #1: Unearth Some Urban Decay

You do not have to be in New York City or Los Angeles to get that textured urban-look featured in all the fashion magazines. With a little effort, you can locate an antiquated factory or warehouse in any size town. In his town of Eau Claire, WI, Chris gives seniors a choice between two classic scenes of urban decay, "the factory" and "the warehouse." He says, "What makes a setting dramatic is directional light, not flat flash. In the warehouse we have giant 1930s multi-pane windows on all four sides." To secure this wonderful setting, he gives the landowner a few hundred dollars per year in return for his key to the domain. "It is important to be careful on borrowed property. We never disturb anything or leave any litter."

Chris uses two small lights on stands, Vivitar 285 strobes, and his personally customized light modifiers to light most of his locations. Chris' favorite lens is an EOS EF 70-200mm f/2.8L IS USM. "With it, I can compress the background, but maintain softness on the subject. When I want to show the whole environment, like the roof, walls and smoke stacks of the factory, I change to a wide-angle lens to heighten the expansive background."

Scouting Tip #2: Cross a Bridge Over Troubled Water

"When choosing a location, learn the history or legends about the area," explains



Chris. This gives the session a little mystique. People say that the “Troubled Water Bridge,” where Chris takes many of his senior clients, is haunted. In the early 1900s, “a logger, distraught over losing his job, killed his family, and then hanged himself from the bridge.” With a grin, Chris delivers the punch line. “Now on dark moonlit nights, green eyes glow from a man shaped apparition hanging from the bridge.”

Chris takes seniors to this one lane bridge for its textures of wood and steel, as well as for its geometric patterns of shadow and light. He advises, “When you search for a picturesque bridge, try to find one that runs north and south. You will be able

to photograph there in three directions without putting the sun in your client’s eyes and getting a squinty facial expression.”

Chris gives credit to Tony Corbell and Monte Zucker for his knowledge of lighting locations. “I shoot all day, even at high noon.” He adds, “Often I use a three-light setup, but I only carry a reflector and one portable light. The sun is the backlight. The ambient light is my fill light. This means that the main light is the little portable strobe on a stand or a reflector. This is not because it is the brightest, but because it is the one that puts light on the face.” He proves that lighting an “outdoor setting is not that different from lighting in the

studio. In the studio, you move the lights, but on location, you move the subject, not the sun, to change your lighting!”

Scouting Tip #3: Big Falls and Lighting a Waterfall

Sometimes you get two locations for the price of one. Fall Creek seniors can choose the north side, the south side or the beach of a local waterfall for their location sessions. An important hot tip for choosing a location is to study how it will change with the light. At Big Falls, scheduling the south side is more difficult because with the water behind the client, the sun is in the subject’s face. That said, Chris schedules south side



appointments late in the afternoon when the scene is drenched in sweet light. At the waterfall, he often uses a little strobe on a stand because the reflector can be blinding to the subject. "I keep the flash set so short that they don't react to it. I set it at ISO 50, $\frac{1}{250}$ of a second, at $f/4.5$ or $f/5.6$ in bright sunlight! I adjust the strobe to $\frac{1}{16}$ power at 10 or 12 feet away. With this system, I am able to focus the light on the face."

Scouting Tip #4: Be Sure the Junkyard Dogs are Friendly

This tip evolves from the suggestion that you should always be open to the ideas of your clients. For instance, when the



junkyard owner's son, a high school senior, wants to pose in his father's junkyard, it could just be the beginning of a beautiful relationship! After it happened to Chris, he bargained to get the use of the junkyard in exchange for a few hundred dollars per

year. The junkyard where Chris Nelson shoots is unique because it houses old 1930s and 40s cars. "The car windows and hoods can be used as reflectors. I love to sit in the cab of the truck and shoot through bullet holes and shattered glass."

The bonus of this location setting is that "the junkyard is a great place to experiment with unique angles and fresh poses," says Chris. "Soon your style will begin to have a new look." Another great quality of a good location is contrast. More than one female high school senior has worn a prom dress in the junkyard for a look worthy of any high-fashion spread in *Teen Vogue*.

Scouting Tip #5: You Don't Need an Ocean

Most clean, clear-looking rivers have sandbars, like the Eau Claire River Beach. This can give your sporty seniors a beach-like setting. Every year Chris takes four or five horse-loving students out to this river location where the animals are permitted. He has one caveat:

"Take a pickup truck or an SUV because lighter vehicles can sink!"

Scouting Tip #6: Chickens and Piglets and Horses, Oh My!

For this location—Sieg Farm, a small working farm—Chris pays the owners in photography gift certificates as well as a few hundred dollars in fees. “If you find a farm with a cool-looking barn, watch for the directional light as it spills from the doors of the hay loft,” he says. On any farm, the rusting elements, the well weathered wood and the peeling paint offer countless opportunities for creativity.

Scouting Tip #7: The Foundation

Unlike the lively Sieg Farm, this locale is the stone foundation of a long deserted barn on neglected, overgrown farmland. It consists of crumbling stonewall and fallen oak beams. The ruins and the thick overgrowth in the middle of nowhere create shade and fine directional light. “Look for diversity. To qualify for your repertoire of scenes, a good location must include a variety of scenic elements.” Chris found a good example of such a site in Keller Park, with an antique baseball field, a railroad trestle bridge and woody thickets. Clients can choose either the lake and the bridge or the creek and the woods. Keller Park

became so popular that Chris had to retire it as a setting for a while. He brought it back into service this year, but he has also recently added a new one—“the caves”—for adventurous teens.

Scouting Tip #8: Don't Get Caught Up the Creek Without a Camera

Unlike the falls and the Eau Claire River, Nine Mile Creek is a little shallow body of water with a nice gorge and flat sculpted sandstone rocks. Chris grins and quips, “When shooting this type of area, you might have to put yourself and your light stand right in the shallow creek water! It is the only way to put the light exactly where you want it.”

Scouting Tip #9: Check Your Area for a Rod and Gun Park

For a deeper forested scene, Chris found the Rod and Gun Park, which was a Depression-era project. The scene features a spring at the top of a hill. Half Moon Lake overflows into seven levels of spillways, creating a lovely ambiance. The canopy of trees overhead helps turn the sky into a giant softbox. In any deeply wooded

setting, you will find a great deal of shade, so Chris says to “look for the shafts of light coming through the trees.”

The factor underlying all of Chris' senior location choices at Fall Creek Portrait Design is a certain amount of “wow.” This requirement is what Chris noticed was missing from his competitors' scenes and backgrounds, and it was the push he needed to scout unique locations. On his way to defining the personal style of his high school senior clients' lives, Chris Nelson has begun to define his own signature style as a portrait artist. In Arthur Ravnille's words, he has learned to “explore, discover, be inspired and play.” Best of all, Chris is making money in the process. A trip to the senior gallery at www.fallcreek-photo.com will make you wish you were a high school senior again. 

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