



Sarah Jane Sanders



Inspiration is Everywhere

By Mary Kole

Sarah Jane Sanders brings infectious enthusiasm and boundless energy to the craft of photography. Her photography philosophy can be boiled down to one thing: the joy of learning. That's why she was a perfect fit to win WPPI's 2009 Hy Sheanin Memorial Scholarship. The prize? An all-inclusive trip to Las Vegas for the WPPI Conference, including tuition to the Plus workshop of her choice. The experience taught her, she says, that, "Inspiration is everywhere, and education is key."

From an early age, Sarah Jane learned about visual art from her grandmother. Coloring at the large kitchen table honed her eye for colors, and her talents in composition and design came through painting and sculpture experiments. While studying at the University of Kentucky, Sarah Jane dabbled in graphic design. It wasn't until a fortuitous ad in the local newspaper changed her life: *Wanted—weekend help photographing weddings. All equipment supplied.* Sarah Jane had never seriously considered photography, but it turned out to be a natural fit. "Photography felt very simple, a natural reflection of what I saw in the everyday," she says. "The camera was a tool I could use to grab a picture instead of, say, sculpting or painting it."

The ad had been placed by photographer Frank Becker, for his studio The Time Photography. After making that connection, Sarah Jane worked with Frank for four years and learned the trade. "Frank is definitely my mentor," she says. "That's how I knew about WPPI. He opened that world to me. I started coming to the conferences and started to see that there's a lot of art to photography. I did workshops, read blogs, kept track of who was teaching where; that's how I started getting informed."

She didn't just plug into the world of professional photography, she started to develop her own style. In the course of shooting weddings with Frank, Sarah Jane discovered her real passion:

people. "I love photographing anything," she says, "but my love is people, especially in their own environment, without any direction or manipulation. People are all so different. I hope that in a photograph I take of someone, you see their story." It is here that she finds the essence of photography, and her biggest personal reward. "Photography allows me to grab a particular being and their environment and give them life until the photograph no longer remains," she says. "It's freezing every moment that has led up to the exact second when the shutter opens. A person's very essence can be captured in the image. We are all the way we are because of what we have gone through, lessons learned and people met. The most rewarding thing about photography is when the story of that individual can be shared with all who choose to look deeper into the photograph."

Developing her craft wasn't always easy. Sarah Jane describes a particularly rough year of working at her day job while going through some growing pains with her art. She describes it as a "wonderful and humbling point in time." It was during this year that her research on the Internet pointed her toward the Hy Sheanin Scholarship. Sarah Jane took a hard, close look at her work, wondering if she was ready. "It was the last year I would've been eligible and I was coming up to the last month you could submit," she recalls. "I never had enough confidence in my photographs to try before." It took her a while to work up the nerve, but, for the first time, she realized her portfolio was ready.

Putting together her entry was a rush. She remembers the day she sent it out. An advocate for a simpler life, Sarah Jane rides her bike everywhere, but she borrowed a car that afternoon. "I was running around, getting prints matted," she says. "It was exciting because it was the first time I was putting my photographs out there. But it was intimidating, too. I sent it off and tried to forget about it." It turns out she forgot too well.



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On December 10, 2008, which happens to be Sarah Jane's birthday, she saw a strange phone number popping up on her caller ID. She ignored the call at first but later got curious and dialed the number back. It turned out to be Arlene Evans, WPPI director, calling with excellent news. "It was a great gift," she says with a laugh. "I came running into the bakery screaming, 'I got it!'"

Sarah Jane was even more excited to attend WPPI again, and especially the Plus workshop. She chose Jerry Ghionis' class, because she loved his blend of style and business savvy. Those two days of Plus training were her favorite part. "The workshop is only a handful of people, it's very intimate, you can ask all the questions in the world," she says. "I can't tell you how much information I soaked up those two days. Every time I'm speaking to my business partner, Aurelia, it just keeps pouring out, there's so much I learned. I wish everybody could experience that. You really open up to so much information and inspiration."

The conference itself was also energizing. "It was exciting to meet a lot of new people, talk to them and ask questions. I don't know if I would've done that before the scholarship," she says. It was also her first time entering a print competition in the premiere category, which turned out to be a great resource. "I listened to everything the judges had to say and it really taught me a lot about composition, about what they're looking for, and about what makes the difference between an okay photograph and an excellent one," she says. "It was very rewarding to hear everyone's prints critiqued."



Even after public-speaking-phobic Sarah Jane had to make a speech in front of the whole convention, she can't say enough about the experience. "It was completely surreal and an opportunity I was really lucky to have. I really appreciate everybody and everything that went into it."

Now that Sarah Jane has the Hy Sheanin Scholarship and her first professional WPPI conference under her belt, she's

launching Sanola, a studio of her own with friend and business partner Aurelia Gerardo. Their work together so far has consisted of wedding photography, editorial—or what Sarah Jane calls "lifestyle" shots—as well as children's portraits, which are a passion of Aurelia's.

Sarah Jane is finding the new venture to be full of both rewards and challenges. "I'm still at the very beginning stages of learning," she says. "Everyday I have question after question after question. I'm still trying to bring all of my artistic side to it. This whole year I was still working at Frank's studio. Now I'm building my business."

While challenging and time-consuming, Sanola is truly a labor of love. "It's rewarding when you work really hard, when you spend endless hours and nights thinking about something. Aurelia and I are always brainstorming; we're always creating. Both of us are able to be creative in new ways. It's how we want to run a business," Sarah Jane says. Customer service is especially important to both photographers and has been from the get-go. It will continue to be the cornerstone of their business. "We treat our clients with respect and generosity. We care for them as we want to be cared for. There are so many little rewards, we're so lucky."

As for Sarah Jane herself, she enjoys

the challenge of juggling her hectic life—"working as a baker, being an artist, a business owner, family member and good girlfriend, to have all of those things that I love in this world in balance"—and leaving room to evolve.

"I love the idea that, with hard work, we can do anything," she says. Sarah Jane's vision encompasses all creative people. "Through staying true to yourself, your craft and your passion, anyone, whether it's a photographer or a businessperson or writer, can do anything," she adds. "I think anything is possible. The biggest thing I took away from this experience is that opportunities are out there for everyone. Going forward, believing in yourself and trusting yourself and your work is most important. I'm always striving to learn and grow."

It's this generous nature and Sarah Jane's true artistry that caught the eye of Hy Sheanin judges last year. And, as this talented winner says, opportunity abounds for everyone.

You can also find Sarah Jane's studio, Sanola, at www.sanolaphotography.com.



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