



Jim Davis-Hicks

by Martha Blanchfield

Quenching a Thirst

He's been to Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania; New York; St. Lucia; Las Vegas; and the Amazon to photograph recent assignments. He's donned black artsy-dressy-edgy threads one day, and jeans, T-shirt and cap for work at the office the next. He travels in a variety of circles, from mixing it up with wedding industry stalwarts like Mike Colón, Bob Davis and Kenny Kim, to crouching over a Biosand Filter [a water purification method] in a remote region of the world. Some days his suitcase is laden with a Nikon D90 and D2X, Nikkor lenses including a 70–200mm, 17–55mm, 28–70mm, 10.5mm

fisheye, 105mm macro Sigma, a set of Nikon SB800 Speedlights and a 17-inch MacBook. Other days it contains diethyl-meta-toluamide (DEET insect repellent), ciprofloxacin hydrochloride (Cipro® antimicrobial agent), essential oils, toilet paper and, of course, a camera.

Triangle of Life

Jim Davis-Hicks and his wife, Lara, are owners of Ohio-based Davis Photography. They are also founding partners of Thirst Relief International, a nonprofit development organization working to improve access to safe water in several countries. And

Davis-Hicks manages a fledgling firm that markets and produces ActionRunner software. Individually, any one of these roles is a handful; combined, it's a more than 60-hour workweek. Yet today, all fuse together seamlessly and synergistically.

"First came our photography business," shares Davis-Hicks. "In 2005 Lara and I started Thirst Relief. As Thirst and the studio were growing, I was becoming more and more ensnared in the digital photography beast. The increase in work was good, but it meant more image files, which equated to more unproductive time waiting and watching these huge batches



of files process. Out of need came my software invention, which allows me to devote more time to what really matters: helping people through photography and social work.”

And in other what-really-matters aspects, he and Lara have developed a philanthropic product line—the “Life in Art Collection.” Instead of selling a custom framed 20x30-inch print on metallic paper with a Pro-

texture spray, the print is marketed as “an element within a specific regional collection,” he shares. “Today, all of our products help save lives, with each ‘Life in Art’ piece being tied to one of our water projects. For example, a portion of sales from the ‘Xingu Collection’ will be dedicated to purchasing a water filtration system for a family along the Xingu River in Brazil.”

Davis-Hicks adores photographing wed-

dings and indigenous people of other cultures. “I live in two worlds; one day I’m photographing a luxe wedding in a glamorous location, the next day I’m photographing an entirely opposite way of life. Despite the differences, I find a great deal of overlap. It’s through those high-end weddings that I can turn around and devote time and effort to pursue Thirst Relief projects. My photography can be put to best use on both paths.” A recent fusion of paths took him to Tanzania.

Glamour and Goodwill

“A while back I started building a vision for an event that combined my two worlds of glamour and goodwill,” adds Davis-Hicks, who shared this concept with Mike Colón, who was immediately excited and joined in to expand the original vision to include a wonderful play of high-style wedding fashion. “Mike was huge in bringing several influential pieces to the table that rounded out the overall plan.” Colón invited a team of photographers and production crew, then persuaded editor Grace Ormonde of *Grace Ormonde Wedding Style* magazine to buy-in. Adds Davis-Hicks, “She loved





the concept of staging a high-end fashion shoot in rural Africa, and personally contacted gown designers.”

Colón coordinated most fashion elements; Davis-Hicks lined up Thirst Relief components. Once in Africa, the entire team helped with hands-on installation of filtration systems and met with the village people. “Over the next few days we installed 60 filters. The trip was a huge boost for Thirst, as well as each person! It was amazing to see the faces of so many children and adults who would directly benefit from what we were about to do,” he smiles. The team of 15 was in Tanzania from July 13–22, 2009. Read more about this project: www.thirstrelief.org/tanzaniabenefit.

The *Grace Ormonde Wedding Style* issue, which hit newsstands in January 2010, boasts an 11-page fashion/editorial spread. All images were produced over the course of two days using six couture gowns. Several shoot venues and setups were pre-arranged, but once in Tanzania nearly all was created on the fly. “We became moved by the moment, shooting what seemed to work. Spontaneity was the best recipe. Local bikes, palm groves, ruins—whatever worked was used. And of course the village people kept pouring round to watch!”

One Smoking Photo

A key piece included in that original Thirst vision, but not shared with Colón



Thirst Relief International is a water development organization working to improve access to safe water in eight countries worldwide. Founded in 2005, Thirst Relief works with its implementing partners to launch and sustain water projects in impoverished rural areas and urban slum communities. By providing infrastructure development, training, and financial and technical resources to our partners, the organization is helping thousands of people each year improve their health through safe drinking water.

www.thirstrelief.org

or the group, was a photo Davis-Hicks had long been shaping in his mind. As it happened, the Tanzania setting offered the

perfect flow of conditions for executing this look. “The Burning Money Shot” (pg. 114) is teased with high style and burns in a strong social message. “I had a picture of a bride burning a one hundred dollar bill as if it were a cigarette,” he gestures. “I had to scan the bill, wrap it as a cigarillo, then convince the model to smoke it. I waited for the right light at the end of the day and, not wanting to take the model away from the other shooters for too long, I grabbed five minutes to stage and photograph her before I lost the light in the sky.” Two of the photographers, Luke Edmonson and Ben Harrison, were helpful in holding up lights. Davis-Hicks used a Speedlight and video light to illuminate the model, plus a Nikon D2X. And I cannot forget the really bad African match that didn’t want to ignite very easily! I was thinking all along that I had just one chance to capture that perfect shot, that have-to-have-it image I’d been thinking about for such a long time.” He was triumphant, recalling relief washing over right afterward. “I nailed it! Trust me, I was really pushing the daylight in those last moments. You don’t want to be on the road in rural Africa at night. I can still hear our ground leaders and drivers yelling to get in the truck.”

Per its creator, the importance of this image goes deeper than just a novel look or angle, setting or theme. It’s infused with strong social messaging. The image is

designed to make a statement: You can either burn it all on yourself, or you can make a difference.

"The intent of this photo is to convince or to encourage." Pointing to how much some couples spend on their wedding, he puts forth: "Are you socially aware of what you're spending on? Do you consider vendors who give back? If you are going to spend extravagantly (and he nods that his clients certainly do), why not choose

drop and edit system that allows photographers to apply any number of actions to any number of images in a batch mode to automate an edit run.

"Photographers, especially wedding photographers who work with a large number of files and many presets or actions, spend a lot of unproductive time at the computer waiting for images to go through processing. ActionRunner is one tool that can greatly free up time that can

A Mission For Life

In the profession for 10 years now, Davis-Hicks can clearly envision where he wishes his career and life to go. "My loves are God, family, photography and helping others. It's my dream to carve out a lifestyle somewhat akin to that of a missionary," he shares. "I view my photography as a means to an end that supports Thirst Relief and efforts in many community development areas. I look forward to the day when



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venues, vendors, products, even gown manufacturers who can make a difference?" He ponders how much good could be accomplished in the world if everyone gave back through slightly altered patterns of consumerism.

Running Through the Actions

To create "The Burning Money Shot," and most of his art, Davis-Hicks has developed a refined edit and process system. "Once I shoot an event I return to the studio and the first thing I do is make initial backup, then start to narrow down favorites." The files are run through ActionRunner 3.0, which gives him a super-fast turnaround for processing select images with custom actions. He then takes a selection of these photos and gives each more personality and adds an artist's touch with hand-editing using Photoshop. ActionRunner, a software product Davis-Hicks himself (developed out of necessity), is an easy-to-use drag,

then be applied to other business matters," Davis-Hicks says.

Continuing, he shares a few words about marketing, adding ideas for leveraging the time and reputation of a small studio. "Let others toot your horn! I learned the hard way. I was so excited about my software early on that I turned people away by talking about it too much. In the end it's better to let others talk!"

This pearl rolls easily to the growing world of social media. A solid proponent of old school word-of-mouth, Davis-Hicks is also a Facebook and Twitter power-user. "It's hard to track true benefits, but I love tweeting. It's like constant press releases touching on great things happening in the industry. Facebook lets me give more detail so it's more fun to write about things there. Twitter is high speed and pretty enjoyable on an iPhone. I enjoy posting client and personal images, stories and even bits about great products to social media hubs."

I'm able to secure four to five big, top-tier price range wedding events per year. Reaching that goal will allow me to spend extended time abroad developing water projects in more than just eight countries. I travel often to countries such as Uganda, Rwanda, India, Kenya and more."

Davis-Hicks' work has been featured in *The Knot Best of Weddings*, *Studio Photography and Design*, *Grace Ormonde Wedding Style* and his imagery has landed on various covers of *Columbus Bride*. He's looking forward to presenting a program with Mike Colón at WPPI 2010.

For more info visit www.davisphotographer.com.

Jim Davis-Hicks will be part of Mike Colon's WPPI program on Tuesday, March 9 from 9:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. in Rooms 319-320 in the MGM Conference Center.

Martha Blanchfield is creator of the Renegade Photo Shoots (www.renegade-pr.com) and a freelance marketing and public relations consultant.