

Blair Phillips

Bound to Rise

By Harvey Goldstein



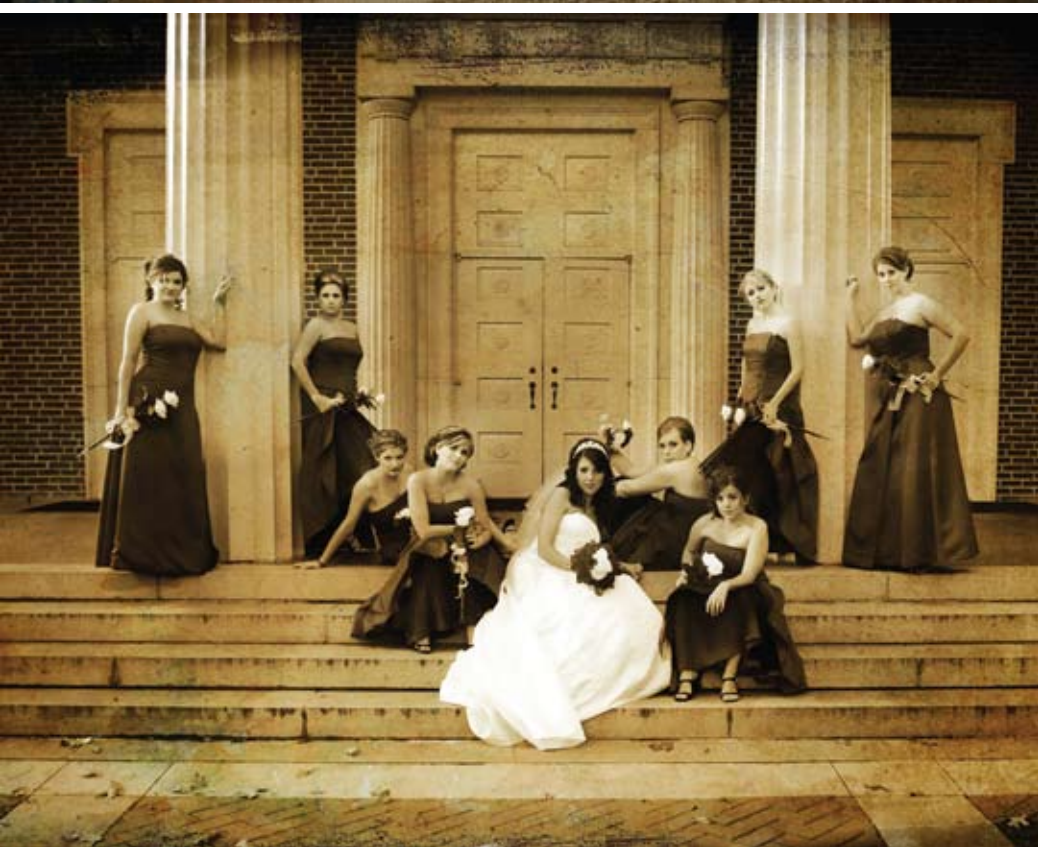
In 2002, Blair Phillips had a full-time job in the glass industry and no thoughts of being a photographer. But everything changed after a vacation on Fripp Island in South Carolina, where his wife, Suzanne, surprised him with a Fuji S2 digital SLR camera as a gift. "It was like all sounds went away and I was in another world," he says, recalling the moment that day when he immediately gathered his family on the beach at sunset for his first photographs. "I knew from that moment that I had to figure out a way to pursue a career in photography."

Growing up disadvantaged, struggling to realize the American Dream, Blair moved in with his grandparents while in the fifth grade. They passed away when Blair was in high school and he had to finish his education while working 40 hours a week at a local hardware store to support himself.

His work schedule and low income meant that Blair would never have a senior portrait taken of himself. Speaking to him, one gets a sense that there is a drive and motivation in his work stemming from this. Years later, perhaps there is a sense of loss or regret that has only added fuel to the fire in his belly.

In only four years, Blair and Suzanne have made Blair Phillips Photography a household name. They are now photographing approximately 50 weddings and more than 200 studio sessions per year in a town with a population of 3100. Suzanne is Blair's business partner as well as his life partner. They have worked together from the concep-





tion of the business toward their present success. They work together as a team photographing approximately 90% of their weddings together. They both take part in the consultation; Blair photographs the sessions; Suzanne edits the images; Blair sells the images; Suzanne orders the images. They credit their success to their strong team dynamic (including their “extended family” at H&H Color Lab in Kansas City, MO) as well as a strong connection to their humble beginnings.

Following his decision to pursue professional photography, Blair initially continued to work for the glass company, but always kept his camera by his side from that point on—photographing anything that interested him and anybody that was a willing subject.

Blair Phillips Photography would eventually grow out of events stemming from a display at a street festival in 2003. At the time, because they didn’t have a studio, Blair and Suzanne’s photographs were all outdoor portraits—at the beach, in parks and on the mountains. This display generated numerous requests about outdoor portraits and eventually led to the birth of Blair Phillips Photography. Blair continued with his full-time job while he established his new studio in Landis, NC, an affluent community (and home to NASCAR) 20 miles from Charlotte.

After a few years of self-taught portrait and landscape photography, a friend asked Blair and Suzanne to photograph her wedding. With no experience with wedding photography, they politely declined her request. But, after the bride-to-be relentlessly prodded them for a few weeks, they finally agreed to explore the unknown and photograph their first wedding.

Blair credits his success in part to a one-day seminar with Doug Gordon. “What he taught us in one afternoon in the back of a warehouse in Georgia really accelerated my passion for photography. He gave me a vision that I could actually have the freedom to carry out what was in my mind.”

To showcase their style and help grow the Blair Phillips Photography brand, Blair and Suzanne display their work in a high-traffic upscale mall in Concord, NC. They have 30x40 canvas gallery wraps displayed in freestanding kiosks.

They also actively use Facebook to reach prospective clients. Social marketing has become the way to expand business in the



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21st century. And, as with most successful photographers, their strongest form of marketing is their clients.

“Our business philosophy is simple. Our wedding clients are including us in their life-changing moment. We are thankful and we show that we genuinely care and that we are proud of what we are doing. It is not just a paycheck for us; we get deeply involved and always try to go above and beyond the call of duty. With every wedding we photograph, we are auditioning for a guest that may be planning a wedding of her own,” Blair says.

What sets Blair apart from other photographers is the experience his clients receive from beginning to end. His clients are like family and it all becomes very personal to him. Because Blair likes spontaneity, his engagement sessions are created without a consultation. “I like to photograph off the cuff. A lot of photographers try to know everything they can about their subjects before their session; I prefer to wait for the day of their session. This way we have interesting conversations and I am showing that I am genuinely interested in their lives. I build my session based around our conversation.”

Blair is dedicated to his Nikon equipment. “The low lighting capabilities accompanied by their vast array of lenses make their tools a must for any wedding photographer. I rely heavily on my Nikon SB-800 [AF Speedlight] for weddings. The wireless TTL capabilities make it possible to create any lighting mood I choose.” Blair photographs in JPEG so that he gets it right in-camera and does not have to rely on Photoshop to repair his images. He uses Photoshop only to enhance his images.

Blair states that at the end of the day he wants to be able to rest his head knowing that he tried his hardest and that he was good to everyone he came in contact with. He encourages new photographers to chase their dream. “If you really want it, this world is filled with photographers who are eager and willing to share with you. Photograph everything you see and you will develop a certain area of interest. Network with other photographers; build relationships. Get involved with forums for sharing and learning and attend seminars. Put yourself on Front Street and believe that you can go as far as you want, but pace yourself because you will not be an overnight success.”

View more of Blair’s work at www.blairphillipsphotography.com.

Blair Phillips will be teaching a Platform Class on Wednesday, March 10 from 8:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m. in Rooms 301-302 in MGM’s Conference Center.

Harv Goldstein from Branford, CT, has been in the photographic industry for 35 years. He is a former studio owner and presently edits numerous association newsletters and magazines, as well as being a freelance writer.



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