

Back to Nature

Cabel Noteboom

By Martha Blanchfield

There remain pockets in America where the land is untouched and nature stretches for miles, punctuated by rushing rivers, grassy sloping hills and steep rocky mountains. It may be a good 10 miles between a farm or ranch; and a town's inhabitants may number fewer than a dozen. Photographer Cabel Noteboom has lived his life in such a place. He and his wife and business partner, Kam, reside in Hardin, MT, population 3468. Their studio, Cabel Noteboom Photography, is located in a historic building on Main Street. "I grew up in the Big Horn Mountains and today Kam, I and our five children live on the eastern plains. As a child, I hunted elk with my father, rising early, hiking to a campsite, then tracking the animal and watching wild herds of ponies chase across the grasslands."

Recounting his first photographic fascinations, Noteboom tells about a trip to Yellowstone Park with his wife. Using a Canon Elan II, Noteboom captured a few images, which he later shared with family and friends. It was an auspicious start—some of his co-workers liked the prints and asked to purchase a few. Soon, an avoca-



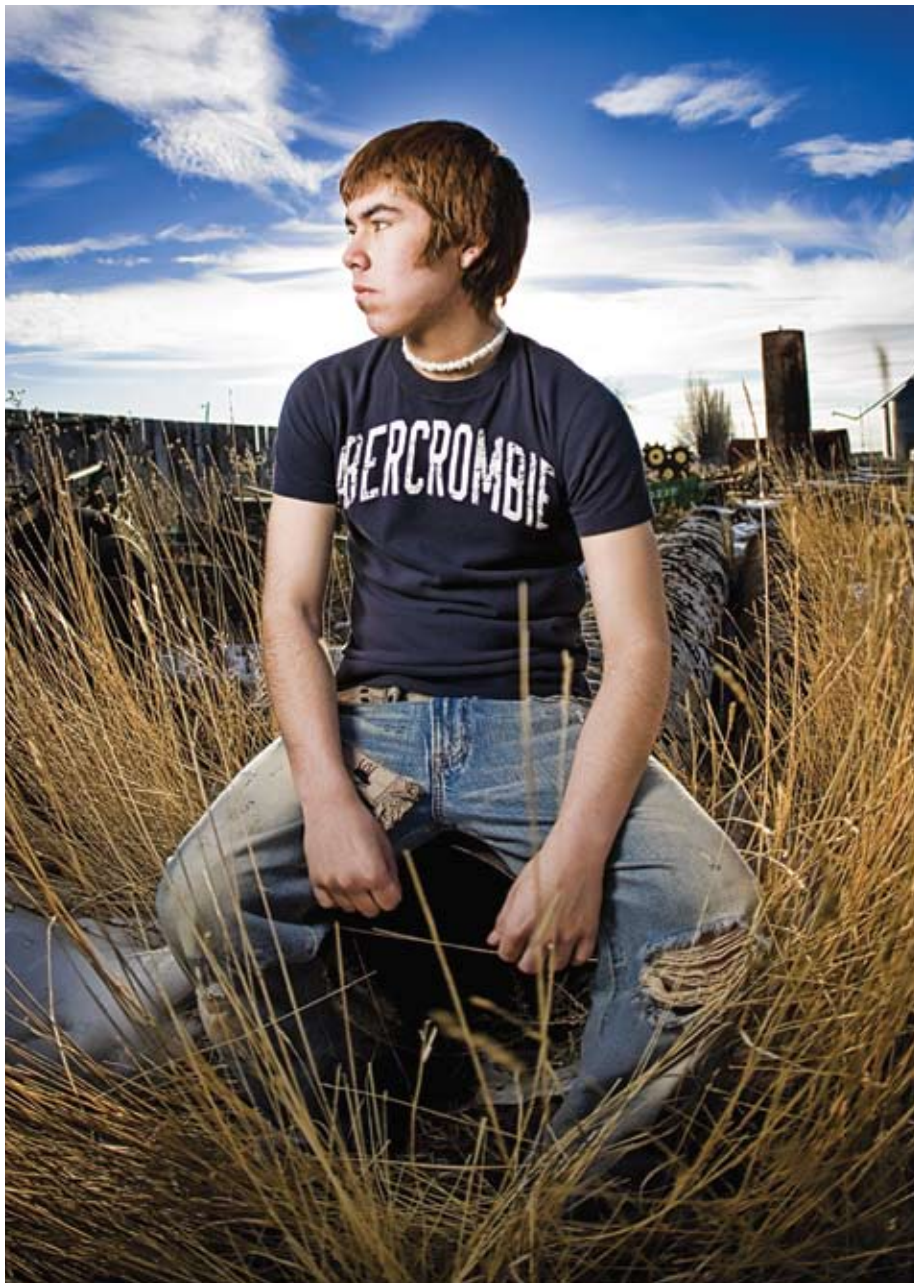
tion turned to part-time commerce and Noteboom's passion began slowly drawing life. He's captured dramatic sweeps of the plains, the rivers and lakes, and all of outdoors. Ranchers in the area started commissioning him to record their land and document branding season.

People in the Lens

A few years back Noteboom expanded his repertoire beyond shooting locations only to include people—being initially drawn to wedding photography, family portraiture and seniors. "It was a natural progression for me if I wished to make photography my full-time job," he shares. "I knew producing only fine art wouldn't be enough." The best thing about Noteboom's decision to pull more people into the frame was that he could draw upon his many years of experience shooting nature and combine his people photography with his deep affection for the land to blend significant and intensely personal images for clients.

Noteboom finds importance in his senior work. "Completing high school is a milestone for every kid in Montana. It definitely holds great importance to both community and family. It's a time of passage to adulthood, and the act of capturing this moment with a cap-and-gown snapshot does not do justice." Chimes in Kam, "It used to be that senior photography was merely a record of the who and what; today's images show far more personality.





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They display what the student does, who they are and what they have accomplished." Noteboom finishes his wife's thought by saying, "Images are also far more fashionable and come with a 'Look at me. Here's who I am' title. It's no longer 40 minutes of canned poses in a studio with a muslin background. We both felt there was income potential and room for improvement in both the wedding and seniors photography markets, so we set sights on attracting more business."

First Year Success in the Senior Market

Even though he and Kam have just wrapped up a rigorous 2009 schedule with

70 student sessions, Noteboom knows diligence is needed to keep his new studio in business and remain top in the minds of a fickle teen audience. Kam comments, "Offering both senior and wedding photography brings balance. Whereas the intense seniors season runs a full year, the wedding photography kicks in mostly for spring and summer." But in an area where the immediate wedding market is not all that large, and student population numbers only 100 or fewer per senior class, the couple realized far-reaching marketing would be in order to hit neighboring towns, which can be as far off as 300 miles.

To boost senior bookings, Noteboom is capitalizing on marketing that best appeals

to a teen market. Right now, he's trying senior reps. What are senior reps? Back in January he and Kam launched a campaign to attract junior-high students who could help spread the word. He started by recruiting, then doing individual photo sessions with his four reps. They staged personal, engaging sessions. He obtained parent permission, then produced marketing materials for each rep using their images in a collage arrangement—photos on the front side of the promo card, studio information and a coupon on the back. "Of course I reached out to the most popular students and asked them if they would work with me," shares Noteboom. "I give the reps incentives to help me nab appointments—booked photo sessions lead to free prints."

The Notebooms are optimistic about the results and find that their senior reps love working with the studio and are anxious to gain a first glance at photos. Says Kam, "We post a few on the Web for all to view. In fact, we recently redid our site and blog to accommodate our new marketing. We know the seniors are showing their family and friends, and the teachers are telling us that students love seeing their images." This small step is an effective social media campaign. Noteboom reveals that peers have been trying various Web 2.0 marketing methods but with mixed results. Personally, Noteboom remains on the fence about adding more social media tactics at this time. He will, however, explore Internet advertising technologies that have been around for a while such as Google AdWords. "I'm willing to try online programs if they make sense. For example, if there's reasonably priced advertising on a portal, referring site or even Google, I will throw it up to see if it sticks. If my company appears on the first page then it's a winner." But at the end of the day, Noteboom singles out word-of-mouth as his most effective promotional method. Another component of his senior reps program includes production of promotional posters for placement at schools.

Making it Personal

Word-of-mouth comes from satisfied customers. "I make the teens the stars of the shoot," he shares. "I like to create both a memorable collection of images and photographic experience." This from an artist who has spent as many



as four hours working with a senior to record just the right theme and vision placed in the most appropriate venue.

"It all starts with building a level of trust and exploring, learning what makes each person special. I take the time to talk with each senior to find out what images they want and I may suggest additions. Around here most of the kids live on ranches and have animals; many are part of a Native American tribe such as the Crow or Cheyenne. Much of their life is tied to the earth so a desire to include nature is a definite. They find it far more fun, and the images are so much more personal if we can head out for a few hours to a favorite location and incorporate significant items such as a horse, pet, automobile or heirloom piece.

"I've learned over the years the tremendous level of respect for tradition the Native American populations have. They take a lot of pride in who they are and seek to celebrate and preserve this." One such shoot comes to mind with a young man who wished to include his great-great-grandfather's war bonnet. For this, as with most other sessions, Noteboom approached the assignment with little pre-visualization. He took into account the subject and his cherished object. He considered shooting vantages and scheduled the session for the best light. Together they hiked to the spot and allowed spontaneity to take over.

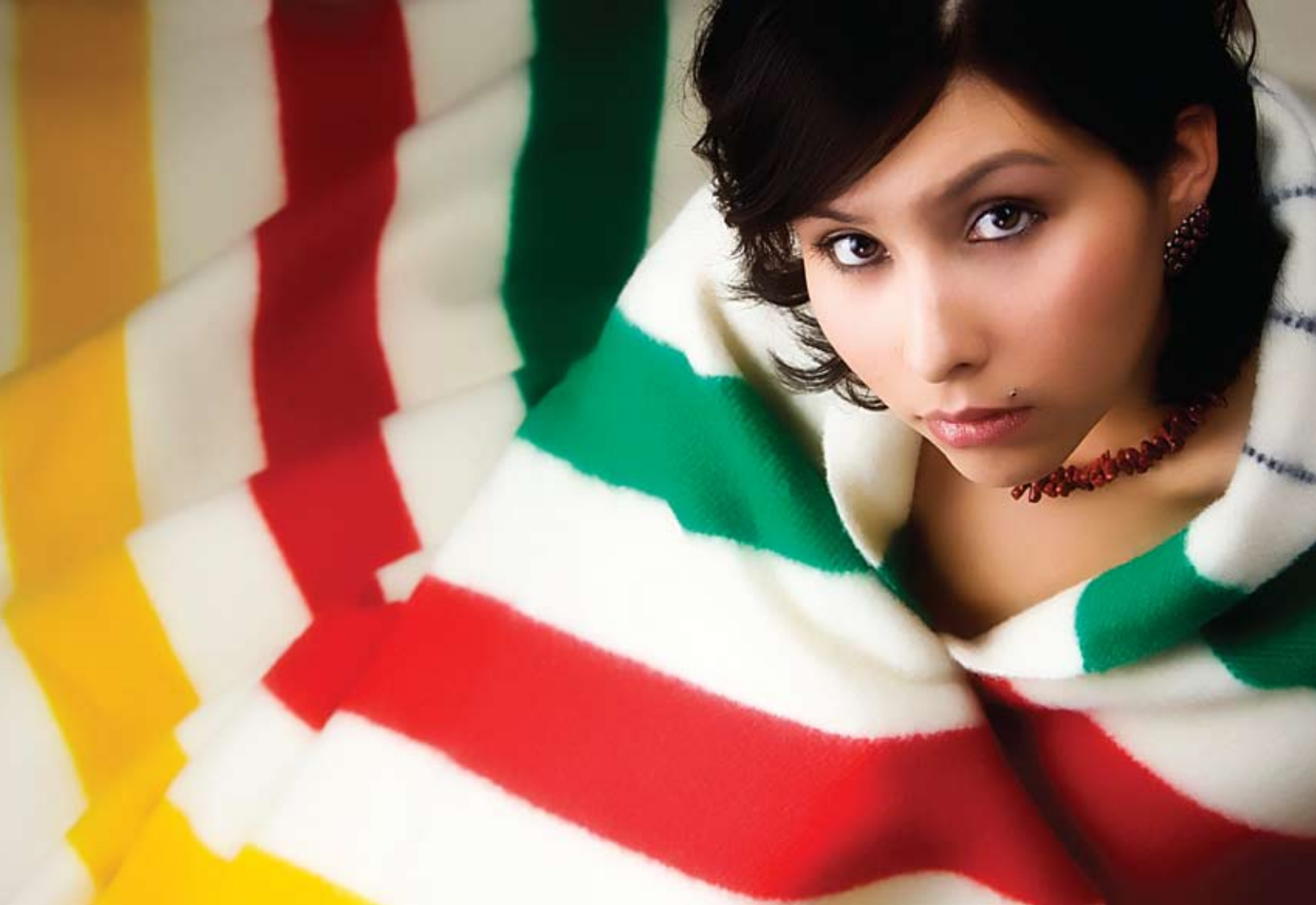
Permitting serendipity to be a guide requires flexibility and skill. Noteboom's staples include a Canon EOS 5D Mark II, plus a 70–200mm Canon lens and a wide angle, a 580 EX2 flash, light stand and radio poppers for wireless triggers. If working in studio, Noteboom will pull out a few Alien Bee lights and sometimes White Lightning strobes.

"The majority of our shoots happen outdoors and this is where Cabel's expertise can shine," shares Kam, who does most of the studio's marketing but is now shooting more. "We'll trek to the family ranch, farm or home. We've done shoots at rodeos and shoots at high school track meets. Some sessions have taken us to wonderfully scenic and remote locations to utilize an important vista or a sunset. Working here beckons a call to the outdoors."

Good Gadgets

Aside from technically great images, how does Noteboom stand apart? It's a

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combination of familiarity and expertise shooting in nature, listening skills and a desire to produce quality over quantity. A self-professed gadget guy, Noteboom was a film stalwart for the longest time, using a Canon Elan, until a 2005 encounter with the Canon 20D that made him change. Says Noteboom, "About this time I felt digital finally met my quality output and needs for business. Not only did digital become a game-changer for how I shot, but also what I shot. The technology made it a natural and easy shift for me to start adding photography of people; digital opened up new realms of possibilities."

Of course other digital gadgets are now requisite within Noteboom's studio. After a day of shooting RAW, he backs up image files to two separate 2TB Western Digital hard drives, then produces a backup DVD and sends it to off-site storage. He relies on MAM-A Gold CD-Rs (DVDs) for their long life. After burning files, the studio does a two-step edit process. First is a pass through Lightroom for determining selects and simple color adjustments, fol-

lowed by proofing. Noteboom next picks a few favorites and adds finishing touches in Photoshop CS4, paying attention to levels and curves. Some images go to their blog, and all will be shown during a preview with client. "We'll shoot about 250 to 350 files and show roughly 100 finals to the ladies, about 60 to 70 to the guys," says Kam.

For processing power the studio just upgraded to a 24-inch iMac. "Another essential here is a Wacom graphics tablet—a must for fine-tuning work, especially on complexions." Not much printing is done in-studio any more; the studio prefers White House Custom Colour. However, the Stylus Photo R-1800 remains at hand for those times when prints are needed quickly.

What's Selling?

Noteboom clients favor traditional pieces. The most popular item is the 20x24-inch gallery wrap. The duo also sells plenty of collage arrangements in all sizes, from wallet to 8x10. Personalization is also favored, with many students requesting their name

and graduation date imprinted in a corner. But no matter the wrapper, Noteboom follows a simple creed when creating art. "For me, if it doesn't have the 'wow factor' it's not something I'll be showing."

Taking a moment, Noteboom adds, "When you live in such a glorious part of the world it's hard to ignore the majesty of the environment and not have it be an influence. Everything about my work is based on my love for the outdoors. I could not ignore this."

Luckily this mission to create the best art and best experience seems to continue attracting customers. "In this market every time there's a new phone book it seems another 10 new photographer names are added to the book," laughs Kam. "We are grateful to have been able to carve out a growing following and put in motion solid marketing tactics that help keep things on the right track." View more work at www.cabelnoteboom.com.

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

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