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Like Father, Like Son

Jerry and Tom Schmidt

By Carresse Muir

Jerry and Tom Schmidt from Warrensburg, Missouri, are a father-son photographic team who work together shooting weddings. As you can imagine, Tom has learned much of what he knows today about photography from his dad, Jerry, who is also a photography instructor at the University of Central Missouri. His

mother, Lisa, who is a commercial artist, also mentored Tom, so it is no wonder he became a professional photographer.

Though Tom is only 21 years old, he has already been working professionally for four years. As a child, he was surrounded by photography. His parents owned a studio, and they photographed in the evenings

and on weekends in addition to their regular jobs at the local university. Tom shot film as a youngster, but while he was in high school it was the digital age that really caught his interest. With a Canon EOS-1D, he shot over 80,000 frames in one year. He enrolled in an evening fashion photography class at the local university during his

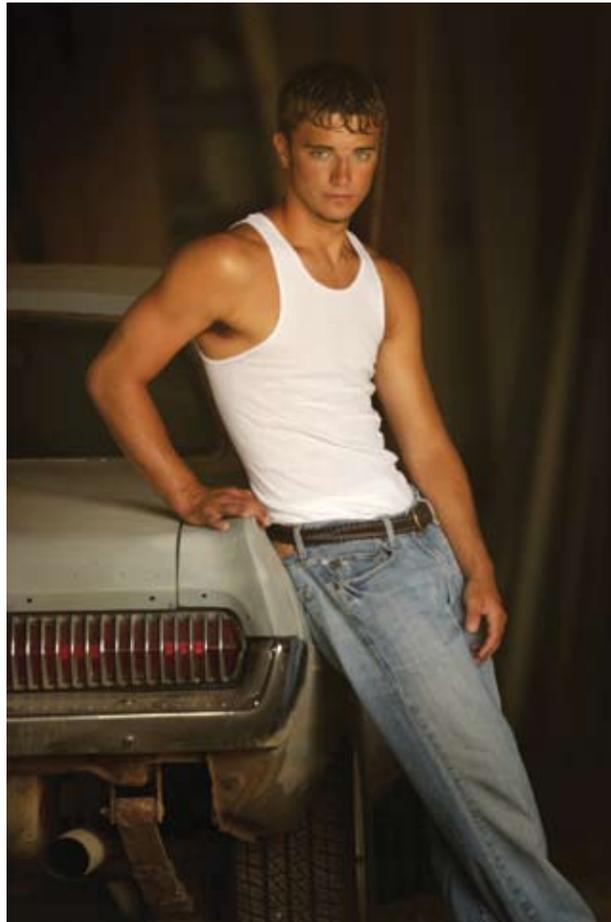


junior year in high school and was hooked by the dynamic and energy of the shooting experience there. Tom photographed his first high school senior before he was a senior himself; his dad assisted him. By his senior year, his business took off, thanks to the tremendous advantage of knowing almost every senior in his class. He photographed 25 senior sessions while still managing to keep up with school and play on the golf team.

Tom is currently studying finance at the University of Missouri in Columbia, about 100 miles away from his home. He usually travels home on the weekends to photograph clients or weddings. Jerry and Tom operate out of their home studio, which was converted from a recreation room. They have a background pulley system, a remodeled bathroom and a gallery with track lighting. They have no other employees, but do hire assistants on every shoot.

Tom's camera system consists of a Canon EOS-1Ds, a Canon EOS 5D and a Canon EOS-1D; lenses include the 70–200mm f/2.8L, 24–70mm f/2.8L, 16–36mm f/2.8L, 135mm f/2L, 300mm f/2.8L, 50mm f/1.4 and a 50mm Macro f/2.5. He and his father have been experimenting with the Epson Stylus Pro 9800 and 4800 large format inkjet printers. They have been successful printing large canvas prints and favor Breathing Color's Matte Chromata canvas coated with Glamour 2 coating. Having mastered the art of canvas mounting to wood stretcher bars, they can gallery-wrap canvas prints from 16x20 to 40x60 inches in less than 20 minutes.

Tom has the advantage of learning most of what he knows about photography from his dad. Tom says, "He has filtered his depth of knowledge of the classic photography teachers to me through home demos. Usually if I have any technical questions, I go to him rather than looking to books or other photographers." Tom does get inspiration from looking through fashion magazines and "the most obscure



magazines I can find," he says. He adds (perhaps jokingly) that he is motivated by "the fear of failing, since photography is my sole source of income."

Tom feels his style has evolved with his mastery of more precision lighting. "When I photograph on location, I primarily use natural lighting with the addition of a large reflector," he explains. "At least 90% of my outdoor pictures have the reflector as the main light. I use the reflector almost like a softbox, holding it up high and bouncing light back on the subject at a good angle. This is why I have to hire an assistant for every shoot—because you cannot get the same effect just setting the board on the ground or clamping it to a stand.

"I have also added a few uncommon lenses," he adds. "I purchased a Canon 300mm f/2.8L my first year of college because I was photographing football at the University of Missouri. I owned the lens, so I tried using it on my portraits. It gave such a unique look with super shallow depth of field and the ability to make pictures in more locations. My clients always get excited when I pull that lens out because it is so dramatically big. Another lens that has added to my shooting style is the Canon 135mm f/2L. This lens has a beautiful shallow depth of field as well but is not nearly as heavy as the 300mm. The fixed focal length of this lens forces me to zoom with my feet, which causes me to move around more and make different images."

Jerry has obviously taught his son very well. He advises today's students to realize what a gift the digital age has presented to them and "shoot like crazy." Back in the film days, it was quite expensive practicing with every exposure costing about a dollar. Jerry thinks that shooting a lot is important because, he says, "Each time students make an exposure, they become stronger as photographers. They embrace the myriad of decisions involved in taking a single shot. Each shot makes the photographer



stronger.” As an educator, Jerry knows the importance of students making a plan. He advises, “Students who have an idea of what they want out of life as they get involved in their education have the greatest success. I can say this with some certainty, as I have watched students as they make progress through the program. I think it is a matter of students visualizing themselves doing the job they want for their lives. This is not necessarily a formal business plan, but a more personal and dynamic plan that would involve realities of family, love, finance and ambitions.”

Even though Jerry teaches at a university, he doesn't think that following a curriculum a school has developed is always the best way to learn. He advises that students will learn something new whenever they recognize a void in their own personal knowledge; this way the learning is more rewarding and tends to be longer lasting. Jerry believes in the Web and feels that one can learn almost anything photographic there. He says, “The community of photographers worldwide provides a great and often untapped resource of information and expertise. My advice is, find a pro doing what you want

to learn and contact them personally with a call or email. Often even the busiest pros will find time to share and give back to a sincere student's request. Tom spent a couple of weeks visiting several of the top studios in Kansas City and St. Louis as part of his self-directed education”

Finally, Jerry recommends that every photographer develop their own style through a variety of ways. “This process often starts with a process of introspection to define the photographer's passions and perspective in life,” he says. “But I would caution the student photographer not to think so much that they are not shooting. Personal style will reveal itself in a natural way through shooting. If a student is struggling with developing a style, I recommend just start shooting and see what comes out of the camera. Then with a significant volume of shooting, the student can see what shots, subjects and approach they feel ownership of. The next step is to edit and select, committing some images to a portfolio. This process is repeated throughout a career to develop a portfolio representing their style.”

Tom has followed his father's advice, and

even at his young age he has developed his own personal style. The two of them make a fantastic team photographing weddings together. They both photograph lots of photojournalistic images with their Canon cameras but also work together on the formal shots. They light the group shots with a Dyna Lite 500Wi power pack with two heads, with Jerry doing the posing and Tom behind the camera. At the reception, they both shoot candids from different angles, often adding an extra light. Jerry will position a Lumedyne unit in a small softbox while Tom finds the shots.

Jerry and Tom are most fortunate to share the same passion and be able to work together. The legacy of Schmidt Photography will live on for many years. For more information on the pair, visit their website at www.schmidtphoto.com. 

Caresse Muir is a Certified Professional Photographer and a Master Photographer. She specializes in family, high school senior and children's portraits. She is a member of PPA, WPPI, the Professional Photographers of California and the Professional Photographers of San Diego County, where she has served as president. She has won awards for her photography on the national, state and local level.