

HORIZONEWS #7

NEWS, THOUGHTS AND IMAGES FROM HORIZON PHOTOGRAPHY WORKSHOPS

The question is not what you look at but what you see.
Henry David Thoreau

STUDENT PHOTOS: CLOSE-UP



Photos: Donna Elkins (top); James Messerschmidt

The “Photographing Real People” workshop with Bobbi Lane does not lack real people to photograph, as you can see in this month’s HORIZONEWS. The residents of Chesapeake City are accustomed to seeing Horizon students meandering through town with their cameras, and most of the locals are quite comfortable having their picture taken. For those occasional folks who are surprised when confronted with a camera pointing at them, Bobbi offers many tips for how best to approach strangers to get their full cooperation.

One of the town’s more familiar and colorful characters is Ed Lee, who collects, rides, and even races antique bicycles, the kind with the colossal front wheel that make it as much a challenge to mount and dismount as it is to actually ride. During pleasant weather, it’s a common site to find Ed high atop his bike, dressed in period knickers, suspenders and derby, toodling around town, often with adoring kids biking close behind. Ed was happy to strike a pose—actually many poses—for our students in front of his beautiful home, just up the street from our headquarters.

Here are two very different views of Ed with his bike. Donna Elkin’s close-up really captures the essence of Ed. We like the way he’s looking off in the distance, as if lost in an early 19th century time warp,

or maybe thinking about his next race. This shot might have been improved slightly if just a bit more of Ed’s bike was visible in the background. If the camera had been a few inches higher that would have happened. (A wooden box and/or a footstool kept in the car can give you that useful little bit of “elevation.”) A very different portrait, but equally successful, was made by James Messerschmidt. This pleasing composition shows off to great effect Ed’s two proudest possessions: bicycle and home. Our Monday Morning Quarterback nitpicks: Ed could be just a *little* more prominent in the shot. Three ways to accomplish this: first, crop in slightly tighter, perhaps cropping out a sliver of the left and the top. Second, move Ed two feet closer to the camera (any closer than that and he’d be off the sidewalk). Third, use a wider wide angle lens and move in closer; the exact same amount of house could be included but Ed would be relatively closer to the camera than the house and therefore would appear relatively larger. Two more minor suggestions: if someone was around to volunteer, have them hold a reflector to bounce some sunlight into the shadow side of Ed’s face. Also, avoid losing the black hat against a black background.

We frequently make prints for the townsfolk we photograph. With outstanding results like these, is it any wonder our neighbors welcome our student’s cameras?

QUICK TIPS: BACKGROUNDS



Backgrounds can make or break a portrait, and selecting one that enhances your subject is just your first step. How much background do you want to see? Should the background be parallel to the film plane/digital sensor? Should it be out of focus? If so, by how much? The final image outcome will depend on where you place the subject relative to the background, what angle you shoot, and what lens and aperture you choose.



Here we pose another Chesapeake City resident, Lauren Fekete, with the remnant of a stone barn at nearby Elk Landing, a favorite Horizon haunt. The photo at the top left reveals the rock wall and its surroundings of grass and bare trees. The next shot integrates Lauren with the wall. The three images at the bottom use different positions, lenses, and apertures. These five variations are among the two dozen we shot in less than an hour, each one markedly different from the others. We'll skip the tech details for these shots. If you want to develop a sense of the vast creative control you have over the look of your background, take a willing subject to your equivalent of our rock wall and shoot a ton of variations. After each shot, look at your LCD screen, using your zoom tool to see exactly what's happening . . . and when you download the images, check your metadata to see what you did. (Film shooters need to take notes.)



END FRAME

Photo: John Hisken



It is often taught, including by us, that mid-day sunlight on the face is the bane of portraits. The light is hard, contrasty and makes people squint. The general rule is: whenever possible, avoid portraits in direct sunlight. This rule applies doubly for women, and most especially for women who have life lines on their face, since soft light is more flatteringly “feminine.” Another rule of ours, which overrides all others, is: “Rules are made to be broken.” Case in point: Student John Hisken’s portrait of Chesapeake City’s Jane Foard, the proprietor of the “General Merchandise” store that is Horizon’s next door neighbor. The light hits Jane’s face at an angle (sometimes called “Rembrandt Lighting”) that creates a strong, and not at all unflattering, definition. Jane looks off in the distance – without squinting – in a way that feels un-posed. John moved in tight for high impact, but the composition is still loose enough to include revealing touches of colorful jewelry and clothing. The small touches of background are unrecognizably out of focus, yet create an environmental, non-studio, feel. One more thing of note: this is *exactly* what Jane Foard looks like. We know her as a woman who is comfortable with herself, so she’ll surely love this shot.