

Carl Caylor

PPA Certified, MPhotog.Cr, F-WPPA, Kodak-Alaris Mentor, IPC Judge

Reflections

ASP Fellowship Thesis

My Grandfather Caylor was all about work ethic. When meeting someone new, he asked for the person's name, quickly followed by, "What do you do?" He taught us that hard work is not something to shy away from but something to embrace. Hard work is what defines who you are and what you accomplish in life. I had a deep respect for his work ethic and always will. I believe my portraits are not only a reflection of the subject but also a reflection of me and all those who helped shape me to be the person I am today. It is my hope that the hard work, dedication and perseverance that was and is so much a part of my life reflects the same in what I create for my guests. My work is not about taking pictures: it's a passion to muster every moment of education and life experience to capture a deep feeling from within — a mirrored relationship with the subject.

The center image of my portfolio personifies this relationship. To draw out the intense story I knew he was willing to tell, I actually growled at him with fast deep breaths, as a coach pushes for one more repetition. I often think to myself: If I were sitting in front of my camera, what gut wrenching hidden part of me would I allow the world to see? This is why, in portraits, I relate to athletes, artists and blue-collar folks. We share the same DNA.

I've dipped my feet in many adventures in my life. I was an avid swimmer and eventually a lifeguard and water safety instructor. I was a wrestler, a pole vaulter and a football player. I was a percussionist in the high school band. I love to hunt, fish and cook. I'm a fan of DIY projects including building my own house. I know what it's like to be up before dawn for extra practice or an early shift at work. I am well aware of the battle between body and mind when it comes time to push past pain and exhaustion to reach a goal.

In my mind there is an "Art" to all we do. I believe there is more to any task than just understanding "the rules." There is a challenge to find a creative thought process that transforms the physical motions of each event to an emotional higher level of that activity. It's a combination of technique and heart. "Art", by my definition, equals passion, practice and perfection.

There was a time I was ranked No. 1 in the state of Wisconsin as a 119-pound high school wrestler. At the same time, I was part of a very competitive high school marching band. Both experiences found me surrounded with others performing at high levels. I noticed that

before events, I could look at the faces of my teammates, opponents and band members and see expressions deep in thought. I call it the “game face.” It was as if a multitude of emotions were trying to speak at the same time. A glimmer of dedication, determination, anticipation, fear, confidence, strength and so much more. I could read so many stories in each face, and all of them were probably true. Elegant, graceful or rugged, these are traits I challenge myself to find in my subject’s face. I remember how alive I felt when I wore this face. It’s a feeling of positive energy I want to pass on to my guests. I guess this is why I enjoy working with dedicated athletes. I still share the same desires and dreams, but now it’s about the ability to create a powerful image of the feelings I once knew so well. To this day, I still get an intense game face when planning a portrait. Maybe the intensity and deep, caring thoughts of my expression lets my guests know it’s alright to reveal their thoughts and stories.

I am a reflection of so many people. My grandfather praised me in success and taught me resilience in times of failure; his “Keep up the good work” or “Keep practicing” still ring in my ears. My parents were detail oriented, with my father using his woodworking skills to build most of our sturdy, flawless furniture and my mother putting enormous attention into every stitch of the wedding dresses and custom historical attire she created. My athletic coaches were extremely dedicated to the programs I was part of and went above and beyond to push me to limits unattainable on my own. My aunt who was a hobbyist photographer and printer in a photo lab sparked the flame inside me to pursue a career as a professional photographer. Then there are my mentors in the industry. Some of them spent a lot of time with me, and others don’t even realize I consider them a mentor. I am a sponge when around my photographic peers. From students to instructors, I take in all I can whether it be a creative concept or a mechanical skill. Each bit of knowledge is then practiced and ready to reveal itself in a future portrait.

Like many in this industry, once in high school, my interests in photography evolved from a hobby to a more serious passion by working on the school yearbook. As it turned out, the yearbook adviser was my wrestling coach. He drilled the ins-and-outs of a camera. He showed me how, even though they are individual mechanical concepts, f-stops and shutter speeds work together. He helped me understand equivalent exposures and why all these technical components are important. I learned how to process film and work in the darkroom. As in wrestling practice, perfection was expected.

For the next two years, I spent much of my days in the darkroom or photographing student life. As a photographer, the camera was becoming an extension of my hand. I didn't have to think about how to record; the mechanics flowed automatically. I learned more custom skills in the darkroom and came to appreciate the power of the black-and-white print. I disagree with Paul Simon—everything does not look worse in black and white. I guess I could say creating black-and-white portraits is my hidden passion. I still create and sell many of them. To me there is a subtle, and in some cases more intense feeling, to match the game face when there is no color to distract.

Thinking back to college, other than meeting my wife, two experiences stand out. The first was being forced into a human cognition class that examined how we process information. The other was an internship that would change my life. The human cognition class didn't teach me photography or art mechanics, but it did explain how our minds work. More on that later. The internship was with Countryside Photography. The studio is owned and operated by Deb Peterson and her husband Randy, a PPA member and past president of both WPPA and ASP. Randy created my senior portraits. I admit that at the time I thought the difference in quality between his work and mine was the big, special camera he used. That illusion rapidly disappeared as I learned what all went into the making of a professional portrait.

During my internship, I was introduced to “the print crew” and the Wisconsin Professional Photographer’s Association. The print crew was exciting work and kept me intrigued and engaged for more than twenty years, during which I also served on the board and held almost every position, including the presidency in 2009. WPPA introduced me to the weeklong learning experience known as Wisconsin Professional Photography School at TreeHaven.

My first instructor at TreeHaven was Mille Totushek. She showed how to use natural light to create a portrait. To this day, most of my work is created with natural light. I can see it constantly. I can move my subject within it to create mood, shape and texture. It is a reflection of the journalism work I did for the yearbook and a comfort zone for me. Mille also gave me a simple phrase to remember, “Look behind your subjects.” It took me three years until I finally realized what she meant. It wasn’t just about branches coming out of people’s heads or other distractions: it was about art and the potential for composition, separation and depth. I began paying close attention to quality work, in both photography and paintings. Mille’s words remained in my head: “Look behind your subject!”

Remembering my grandfather’s ethics, I volunteered a great deal of time before and during WPPA conventions. This gave me the opportunity to spend time with many very talented photographers. While working as the floor manager, I helped Tim Kelly prepare the room for his program. In his work, I saw a relationship between highlights and shadows on the subject, composed with the inverse tones on the background to create separation and the impression of a three-dimensional image. This made sense to me. Back in that college human cognition class I didn’t want to take, I learned that what is shown on a flat piece of paper can play games with the mind. Anything light will appear to be coming toward you. Anything dark will appear to recede away. The combination of light and dark from subject to background fools the mind into seeing a dimension that does not exist on a flat piece of paper. I refer to it as a rhythm of light. I look for this concept in much of what I do, and I spend extensive time in my classes trying to pass on this knowledge. I use the analogy of music. A good rhythm is easy to dance to. A bad drummer with no consistent rhythm makes for bad dancing and bad music. An image with a comfortable rhythm has power.

While working on the WPPA print crew, I met Darton Drake. The light I saw in his work not only gave shape and form to the subject but also helped tell the story. Different patterns of light revealed different emotions. It was okay to show intensity by leaving the mask of the face dark. Beauty and happiness were enhanced by lighting the mask of the face. Again, the human cognition class surfaced. We can tell stories with the combination of expression and the use of light and shadow. Darton took this a step further. His backgrounds also had to harmonize with the emotion and at the same time create power with the use of compositional elements to give the subject purpose. At times, Darton had visions so personal he had to paint the background himself. I watched him paint during a few programs, and he convinced me that I could do it as well. So I did.

I also met Scott Dupras while on print crew. I bonded with Scott quickly. We both liked to hunt and fish, and at that point we were both passionate about print competition. Scott always told me to pay attention to the 12 elements of art, but the most important are light, composition and emotion. Keep things simple, he said. Find a simple background that will help tell a story and create depth and dimension. He explained symmetry and crash points. By creatively placing items in the background, a viewer's eye should go past the subject, giving the illusion of another dimension. The item in the background should be less important so the attention is brought back to the subject. Scott taught me to think deeply about what I was showing in my work. Everything in the image is important to the story. If part of the image is not helping you, it's hurting you.

While at his studio one weekend, I helped him print new display images for his program. We took a break and drove downtown. I saw the underside of iron ore docks protruding out over Lake Superior and thought they would make a great background with the converging lines and the repetition of it all. Later that night we heard on the radio that the dock was scheduled for demolition. I wouldn't be able to get back in time to create my vision. Then it came to me: Paint it. After all, Darton said I could. So I did. The next day, I borrowed some canvas and paint from Scott and painted the background for "Intense Perspective," a portrait of my mentor and a turning point in my career. His window-light camera room only worked to light from right to left, so I painted the right side a little darker than the left to create the rhythm of light that I had come to know. We bought the hat to help tell the painter's story. Before the background was completely dry, Scott took a break from printing and sat for this portrait.

I became obsessed with having just the right backgrounds. For a while I painted backgrounds specifically for my guests. I felt the background was a big part of the impact and story. After painting many backgrounds, it occurred to me to look for the same concepts out on location. So I went in search of backgrounds by vision, lens selection and basic depth-of-field concepts. I would further discover that repetitive items in an image, especially beginning in front and then continuing behind a subject, add depth. This was something I couldn't create on a simple canvas background, and it took me in a new direction for a while.

Reflecting on what I learned in human cognition class, the human mind is more comfortable seeing items in odd numbers. So I looked for that in my backgrounds. Three lamps down the hallway behind the subject in “Zoro’s Mistress.” Three sconces balanced corner to corner in “Poised.” Three dancers within five columns in “Pointer Sisters.” Yes, subjects can be part of the background as well. Then I realized the subject itself can be the background. I began adding extreme close-ups to my guests’ portfolios and was reminded that the subject’s pose could also be, or add to, the composition of the image. When creating environmental or full-length images, I started to pay closer attention to the subject’s body language and placement to ensure it would harmonize with the light and the background in the final composition.

It occurred to me that locations and objects that hold special meaning for my guests could be a more powerful background to them and, when it came time for portrait orders, more profitable. So I began asking questions of my guests. If the subject just completed a graffiti mural, I was going to use it. Regardless of where my guests have taken me, Mille’s words are reflected in my work. I always look behind my subjects.

Then along came the digital world. One day a young lady came to me for a modeling portfolio. She showed me her clothing, and I was at a loss for what to use as a background. When I saw the strange lines she was painting on her face, I got the vision of the background I was going to use. I obviously did not have time to paint a canvas background, so instead I quickly headed to the computer. By the time she finished her makeup, I had created a background in Photoshop that would eventually be behind her. I photographed her in my camera room, extracted her from the background and added her to the electronic painting I made. “Black Magic Woman” was the result. This quick thinking on my feet inspired me. I could make backgrounds without using paint! I practiced by creating my self-portrait, “Stormy.” The background scene was from a trip to Colorado a few years before. I used my natural-light camera room to mimic the light as I guessed it would have looked like at that moment and recorded myself. I merged the two images together and blended until it came to life.

I’ve always been a very caring person. I was the one who went out of the way to make sure everyone was alright. I was there when friends needed to talk or just sit together in silence. When I was young, I felt bad for stuffed toys on the back of the shelf in my room, so I would rotate them to avoid hurting any feelings. Funny, huh? I still really care about those who are a little unsure of themselves. This is why I love to work with high school seniors. Seniors are in a transitional phase. There is pressure, uncertainty, and anticipation for the future. At times, it’s confusing for them. I enjoy being part of their story and listening to what they have to say. I don’t try to give advice: I just do what I can to learn who they are and record what I discover. I do not personally know all my guests, but I certainly hold a place in my heart for each of these young men and women and the stories they share. It makes me happy to give an adventure to my seniors that makes them feel good about themselves and gives them confidence.

Most people don't realize the battle I have with loneliness. I do not like to be alone, but I also have a very difficult time "breaking the ice" with new people. I get anxious, especially at social events, unless I am with friends or working. If I have a camera in my hands and a purpose, I am fine. It is my blanket to hide under. It's strange. I can speak in front of a thousand people, and I can spend days in the wilderness in solitude, but I have anxiety attacks walking alone across a room at a party. Even my extended-family events create anxiety when my comfort-zone people are not with me. My battle is reflected in many of my images. I try to show confidence in lonely situations. Many images show small subjects with powerful expressions, against vacant backgrounds. Maybe it's instinctual therapy, but creating these pieces helps mask my silly fears and builds confidence in my fight for comfort.

Like most, I am uncomfortable with getting old. Senior work reminds me of my youth but also helps me accept my aging process. Maybe there is a powerful transition about to occur. I am at a point in my life where I'm not the kid anymore, and at times I feel I am entering the age of passing on my knowledge. Not to say I am grown up as that will never happen, but there are times when folks ask for advice that seems very normal to me. It's not something I learned in a book, but is based on situations and events that I have been through many times before. It's the same feeling I get when creating portraits of older folks. I see knowledge, experience and, at times, wisdom. I like to see the weathered look of their skin and the deeper expression in their eyes. I guess it's a circle of life. I am not only creating images of it but I'm living it as well. A reflection of where I am going.

One of my original goals in business was to help my guests preserve their family history. I feel the world is neglecting the importance of our personal past. It is my hope that by creating images with power and artistic qualities, the images I make for my guests have a better chance to stand the test of time. Pictures get put in drawers. Portraits hang on the walls of homes and get passed down from generation to generation. My wife and I are no exception. For this reason, I have included our children in my portfolio. In "Self-Sculptured," our boy shows the hard work and dedication reflected from my grandfather, trickled down not only into my photography career but also to the next generation. I pray God will help him pass these ethics on once more. My daughter is "Poised" to show confidence and balance in her life. I pray she comes to understand that her choices now will define who she will be. I hope these images illustrate to their children and grandchildren the same lessons they are learning today.

I will continue to pass on the knowledge I have acquired. I have learned a great deal at this point from teaching. As I stated earlier, you need to have a powerful background that creates depth and dimension. This could be said of people as well as images. A good mentor is like a powerful background. It is said that if you are proficient enough to explain a concept to another, then you understand it yourself. By continually sharing what I have come to know, I am forced to stay current. I am inspired by the "lightbulb" moments of my students, and I am reminded that there is always more to learn.

My portfolio is a collaboration of portraits spanning nearly 20 years, but it reflects a lifetime of experiences, education, practice, success and failure. Each image was conceived in my mind. I chose the location and painted, or somehow created, each background. I communicated with each subject to create the pose and expression to harmonize within the chosen light. I personally did all the retouching and artwork on every image. And, yes, I did all my own printing and finishing. As I reflect on my journey so far, I can't help but hope my grandfather is looking down on me with a smile on his face, bright eyes and a little chuckle in his voice saying "Keep up the good work."

"If beauty were only skin-deep, every photograph would reveal the same personality. We create portraits — an artistic expression that goes past the outer layer, beyond first impressions and into the abyss of one's defining essence." —Carl Caylor

Yours in the Art of Photography,
Carl Caylor

Biography:

Carl Caylor

PPA Certified, MPhotog.Cr, F-WPPA, Kodak-Alaris Mentor

Carl is a down-to-earth, portrait photographer and photographic instructor. He is a Kodak-Alaris mentor and has been involved with professional photography for over 25 years. He started his photographic career in the darkroom as a custom printer and technician. He is PPA certified, a master photographer, a craftsman with Professional Photographers of America and an international judge. He has won numerous national awards for his photography, including 29 PPA Loan Collections and several Kodak Gallery and Fuji Masterpiece Awards.

Carl is the author of the book "Portraiture Unplugged" a guide to natural light portraits and is one of the most sought-after instructors in the country because of his "hands-on" coaching approach. Don't plan on simply watching in his workshop class—Carl will challenge you to become a better photographer than you already are. His photographic skills are just part of what will help each student. His greatest strength is his ability to see what skills others already possess and then break things down in simple terms to help enhance those skills to reach a new level.

Carl prides himself on working hard to be prepared. He stays current on new concepts but is not afraid to look back to the old. He diligently studies photography and art to give his guests and his students the best service he can.

Formal Education:

Pulaski High School	1984-1987
University Wisconsin-Green Bay	1988
University Wisconsin-Marinette Center	1990
University Wisconsin-Platteville	1989, 1991-1992

Professional Education:

Wisconsin Professional Photography School at TreeHaven 1995-1997, 1999-2001, 2004.

I have attended a multitude of conventions and workshops throughout the country. I also took advantage of one-on-one learning experiences with folks such as Ben Shirk, Richard Sturdevant, Jon Allyn, Nikki Harrison, Buddy Stewart, Dave Swoboda, Darton Drake, Scott Dupras, Fuzzy Duenkel, Mille Totushek, Mary Mortensen and many more.

I was also part of the WPPA print crew and WPPA Board for over 20 years. I bumped elbows with some talented and generous souls that were part of, or visiting, the state of Wisconsin. Volunteering was a very large part of my education.

Accomplishments:

Four-time WPPA "Photographer of the Year"
Ten-time PPA "Photographer of the Year" including Diamond Level twice
One Hundred PPA print merits including twenty-nine PPA Loan Collection images
SCPA "Photographer of the Year"
Two-time FV-PPA "Photographer of the Year"
Three-time Certified Professional Photographer Print Award
Three-time Kodak Gallery Award winner
Five-time Fuji Masterpiece Award winner
Lexjet Sunset Award
Burrell Award - 100 print score in affiliate competition
Two-time ASP State Elite Award
ASP Regional Medallion Award
Nine-time WPPA Clean Sweep Award (four for four at regional)
Ten WPPA Best of Show Awards
Twelve WPPA Court of Honor Awards
Eight WPPA Judge's Choice Awards
Five WPPA Outstanding Artistic Quality Awards
FV-PPA Print of the Year
SCPA Print of the Year
Honorary life member Wisconsin Professional Photographers Association
PPA certified
PPA master of photography
PPA photographic craftsman
Approved international juror
Kodak/Alaris mentor
WPPA mentor
Wisconsin Professional Photographers Association past president
FV-PPA Fellowship
WPPA Fellowship
PPA National Award
WPPA Special Service Award
WPPA Special Appreciation Award
WPPA Meritorious Service Award
WPPA Mille Award - given to one who shows dedication to sharing knowledge with others

I have shared my knowledge with students 41 times in 14 different weeklong PPA Affiliate Schools, including WCS, Texas School, ECS, NEIPP, MARS, Kansas School, California Workshops, Wisconsin School at TreeHaven, Illinois Workshops, Florida School, Winona, GLIP, Colorado Workshops and Image Explorations. I have also been involved in various other workshops numerous times, such as After Dark, Light-Pro, SYNC, and SPI. In a more lecture-style capacity, I have given programs in almost every state in the USA as well as on national platforms at WPPI, PPA, Mexico, Canada and Korea. Many associations have had me back several times. At this time, I have earned 370 PPA speaker merits.

Work History:

1984-1988	Lifeguard and water safety instructor: Pulaski Community Pool
1986-1987	Sports action photographer: Countryside Photography
1987-1988	Photographic lab technician and photographer: UW-Green Bay
1987-1988	Photographic lab technician: TLC Photo
1988, 1991-1992	Photographic lab technician and photographer: UW-Platteville
1989-1991	Photographic lab technician: Camera Fair
1991	Internship - Countryside Photography: Randy Peterson
1991-1992	Photographer and photographic lab technician: Siebe Photography
1993-1994	Photographer and photographic lab technician: Turba Photography
1994	Laborer: Spude Concrete
1995	Photographic lab technician: Print Masters - Dan Stoller
1995-present	Owner/Operator: Photo Images by Carl