

Life is an extraordinary journey. It is a constant transition in which there is no beginning or ending but an amazing evolvement where one is constantly learning, growing and refining.

I could not tell you where I am as a photographer without telling you about my journey to photography. My earliest recollection of a camera was the Kodak Brownie that my mom used to take pictures of us when we were children. I remember being intrigued by how a picture could come out of that little box. My dad owned a small business and my mom stayed at home to raise five children. My dad was adventurous and loved the outdoors. He instilled in me a life long love of nature and adventure.

My love of nature inspired my initial interest in photography. I have always had a deep passion for the beauty of the outdoors. I first picked up a camera at the age of twenty-five and begin learning the craft of photography. For many years the great outdoors was my subject.

I have always been fascinated with flowers. The amazing and complex beauty of one of Gods most special gifts speaks to me. I can literally spend hours photographing a flower and not know where the time has gone. It is only natural that my love for flowers would eventually emerge in my life as a professional photographer.

I am aware of the short life that flowers have, and find it interesting to photograph them as they transition through the stages of bud to full bloom and death. In many ways it parallels the transitions my own life has gone through over the years. Daily, I find myself dropping everything to photograph a flower when I see it change into an interesting state because I know that a few minutes later it may look completely different. Recognizing that small window of opportunity and having the discipline to act on it has been the key to the successful accomplishment of many of my flower images

Being able to visualize is a gift one can only appreciate as an adult. As a very young child I had vision. I could see things in my mind and somehow it made sense. I accepted it and thought it was normal. I could also hear things. By the age of five if I heard a song I could sit down at a piano and play it. Always the performer, I loved the spotlight. I was the ringleader in most situations and never fearful of offering my opinion on any subject. I had a passion for everything and that passion overflowed into every part of my life. Many times it got me into trouble, but this passion has been a constant part of my life and has defined who I am as a person.

At the age of four I remember singing in church for the first time. Most of my fellow choir members were in tears, or unable to find their voice because of fear. I was the opposite. I remember standing in front of the congregation trying not to smile so big, but

I just couldn't help it, because I loved to sing. After the church service was over one of the elderly ladies that taught me in Sunday school came up to me and hugged me so tight I thought I might break. She told me "Never hide your light under a bushel dear...always let it shine...God has given you a special gift, you need to use it!"

My childhood and teen years were spent learning everything I could about music. My love for music fueled a passion in me for learning. I went on to college and majored in music. I was not really excited about classical music and I started focusing on composing and performing. I wanted to be on the stage and perform. Two years into college, my opportunity came when a friend's father asked me if I would be interested in singing with a band he managed. That was the beginning of a twenty-five year career in music.

I traveled a lot as a musician and visited many amazing places. I know that many musicians are also gifted in a visual art, but I had not yet found mine. It felt like something was missing. I wanted to remember the places I was going. I was leaving for a job in Bermuda. The day before I left I happened upon a used canon A1 camera in a pawnshop and bought it. I did not have a clue how to use it, so I bought a photography book and decided I could figure it out. Who could have possibly imagined how the decisions I made that day would change my life.

While in Bermuda I somehow learned how to get film into the camera and started taking pictures. I loved the feel of the camera in my hands and the sound of the shutter, but most of all I loved exploring and being out in nature. I am not a very patient person, but I can spend hours waiting for the right light. Even in this very early stage as a photographer I somehow understood beautiful light. I trusted myself and instinctively knew when the right moment presented itself. I took my first roll of film to be developed and couldn't wait to see the results. That night I shared the images with friends. All anyone could talk about was the natural talent I had for photography. I had finally found my visual art.

My music career would eventually take me to Los Angeles. Before leaving for LA I had some new headshots taken. The photographer sent me to a retouch artist and explained what I needed to have done to produce the headshots. I was very intrigued by what she did. I shared my images with her and she encouraged me to pursue photography. Seeing what she did as an artist sparked an intense desire to learn more about the art of photography. I was especially intrigued by the artwork that enhanced the photograph and began to read everything I could about retouching and artwork.

I was lucky to always have work and continued to grow as a musician. Everywhere I went I had my camera with me. I was obsessed. All musicians need pictures and I got a lot of practice learning how to deal with people and their different personalities while photographing my friends. I knew I had a gift for making my subjects

feel comfortable. I am a people person and the performer in me could easily take control any situation no matter how difficult it might be.

A seemingly insignificant moment can change your life. While singing at a charity function with some well-known celebrities in attendance, the event photographer took pictures and gave me his card. When I went to pick up my order I was shocked to find out the photographer's 5x7s was \$75 each! I had never charged anyone for the photography I did for them. This was the first time I realized you could actually make money in photography. I saw something that day that would have a huge impact on my photography. The photographer had large prints of children in black and white with hand tinting in his studio. I loved them, and asked him to explain how he did that. Sadly, he was not interested in sharing. I left knowing this was something I had to learn how to do.

A friend told me that a junior college in my community offered photography classes. After checking it out, I signed up for three classes. This would be my first formal photography training. For an assignment the first week of class, I took the film to a local lab. On the counter was a flyer for a class in hand coloring photographs. I signed up immediately. While preparing for the class, I borrowed a friend's children to use as models and discovered that I loved photographing children. While continuing to take classes at the college over the next three years, I learned how to use studio lights, how to develop film, print in the dark room and all of the basics of composition. Photography had become a very important part of my life.

I spent the next seven years in LA working as a musician while continuing to learn everything I could about photography. The two arts worked together well. They both fed my soul in very different ways yet there were so many similarities. My music and photography became so intertwined that I could never imagine favoring one over the other.

After ten years, I grew tired of the LA music scene and decided to relocate back home to Florida. I drove a more northern route home and spent time in Wyoming and Montana. I wanted to visit Yellowstone and this was my chance. I lined up some music work on the weekends that would cover my living expenses and spent two months driving around, photographing and having the time of my life.

One afternoon while driving through Montana, I passed an old barn with a rickety broken down fence and a field full of wild flowers. It was visually interesting, but for some reason I decided not to stop. Over one hundred miles later I couldn't stop thinking about the old barn, so I turned around and drove back the spot that was so inspirational. When I got there I realized that I was out of film. After frantically looking through all of the camera bags, I finally located one roll of infrared film. I started shooting and in my heart knew I had gotten something very special. That image " Montana Mist" became one of my first Professional Photographer's of America loan prints.

Once I returned home, I continued to work as a musician and began taking small jobs as a photographer. I had not yet made the decision to pursue photography as a

profession. A friend asked me if I would consider photographing her son's wedding. It was going to be a very small event. I finally said yes and we agreed on a small fee. As it turned out, my first wedding gig would be the catalyst for my career as a photographer.

The bride had seen my business card featuring an image of two little girls, hand colored in vintage clothes. She worked for a well-known stock agency that had relocated to Florida from New York, and thought her editor would be interested in my work. She offered to make the introduction. I set up an interview and took some of my images in for review. I was thrilled when the editor said I had some great work and he would like to see more. The next two weeks were spent preparing more images. When we met the second, time he offered me a contract with the agency.

I was concerned about signing a contract, but being new to the industry, I decided I had nothing to lose, and signed with them. A few months later they called to say they had licensed some of my images for a calendar. I didn't think much about it until months later when I walked into Wal-Mart and saw a calendar of my children's work on an end cap in the card department. It was exciting, and I knew the time had come to make some serious decisions about my career as a photographer.

Transitioning out of music was a hard decision. It had been such an important part of my life. I still cannot believe that another art could fulfill that need in me, but photography does.

In 1999, I bought a two-acre property and opened a portrait studio. The next few years were insane. My photography business was a success from the very beginning. Word spread quickly about the children's calendar and I became known for my artistic work with children. My years in the music business helped me make smart decisions. I understood PR and I knew how to "hustle a gig". My ability to be comfortable in any situation, combined with a gift for making my subjects feel comfortable was a dream combination.

It was during this time I first became aware of the professional associations. I was invited to a local guild meeting. I could not believe there was a place that I could go every month, and learn so much for such a small investment. I became a member of the Florida Professional Photographers and began competing. It was then that I first learned about PPA.

I joined PPA my second year in business. I immediately began working on my Master of Photography degree and received it and my Craftsman degree just three short years into my professional career. My business was exploding. I became the preferred wedding photographer in my area. Black and white photojournalism was hot and that was in my wheelhouse! I was still singing 3 or 4 nights a week and running the photography business during the day. I knew it would not be long before I would have to choose one or the other.

It is hard to believe that I opened my portrait studio sixteen years ago. I have worked hard everyday, but have been very blessed to make a great living as a photographer. I have many clients that have become much more than clients to me. They have become my family. I have had the privilege of being a part of the most important events in their lives. I have watched them transition from newly married couples, to parents and then grandparents. Along the way I have shared in their joy and sadly in some cases their losses.

There have been many milestones along the way. I have photographed well-known musicians, US presidents, famous athletes, and Super Bowls. Photography has allowed me access to situations the average people cannot imagine themselves in. With all I have gotten to do, few accomplishments have been as important as being able to give back to an industry that has given so much to me. I was asked to run for the board of directors of Professional Photographers of America. It was not a job I had ever considered. I was honored and could not say no if I was needed. It has been my privilege to serve on the Board of Directors of PPA.

In 2014 I served Professional Photographers of America as its president. My year as president was an amazing journey. I had the opportunity to travel internationally and across the U.S. to represent PPA. I was privileged to visit with many old friends and meet many new ones during my year as president.

In October 2014, I met an amazing photographer that I had long admired. We quickly became friends. During a casual conversation he encouraged me to explore other areas of photography and perhaps consider starting a fine art line. Within a few months, I knew that my life was again about to enter a major transition.

I have always believed that personal work was very important to my well being as a professional photographer and I have devoted many hours to exploring different areas and techniques. It was only natural that at some point I would consider finding my own niche in fine art photography. Sometimes all you need is a little encouragement to start you on a new path.

When thinking about a new direction in photography, only one subject was obvious to me. My love of photographing flowers had continued for more than twenty years. I had photographed them in many different ways and was excited to give myself the opportunity to experiment and see where it would take me. A client had recently sent me flowers as a thank you and I decided to photograph them in the studio. This was the beginning of an experiment that has turned into an obsession. I began photographing flowers almost every night after the studio closed. Photographing flowers in a studio setting renders a very different image than when photographed in their natural environment. The complex textures, unexpected shapes and intense colors come alive.

When you look at a flower through the camera lens you see things that you may never have noticed when viewing them with the naked eye. Some are soft and gentle in their beauty, some are bold, many are funny and some are just strange, proving that God has an intense sense of humor and a strong imagination. As flowers transition through different stages, colors can change drastically and the textures become even more intense. Many of my favorite images are of blooms well past their prime.

In the beginning, I was more interested in finding unique flowers to photograph, but I quickly began to experiment with more common flowers. I soon realized that every flower was an incredibly unique and interesting subject to photograph. Some of my favorite images are of flowers I found along the roadside blooming wild, or in my studio garden.

Photography is a powerful medium. It is a profoundly personal art form. Every photograph ever taken is the vision of a single person. It is the decisive choice of the photographer to see that point in time as something special. In that instant she felt something. She saw something that moved her. In that moment a photograph is born.

Seeing is the true gift. You must be aware and take in all that is around you. Real moments of true beauty are fleeting! Trusting yourself to know the decisive moment to bring an image to life is truly an awesome responsibility. Determination, perseverance and sacrifice are all elements of what it takes to push yourself as an artist, but most important is the heart and passion behind the art. This is truly the driving force of any successful photographer.

As my professional life transitions, I am keenly aware of how it has paralleled the transitions in my personal life. As an artist you must be willing to explore new paths and expect the challenges that come with the unknown. You must learn to face the fear of living in an uncomfortable place and accept that you have been given a gift. You must work hard everyday to give that gift life.

I am more excited than I have ever been about my future as a photographer. The new path I am on is just the beginning of an exciting journey. To have been given the gift of reinvention after working for over twenty years in an art form is incredible, for I believe that a true artist never stops learning, growing and dreaming.

## BIOGRAPHY

Susan Michal has spent over fifteen years as a working photographer and is a respected leader and lecturer in the photography industry. She first picked up a camera while

touring as a musician and knew she had found a new passion. Susan spent 25 years in the music industry and has always worked in the arts. She opened her photography studio sixteen years ago and has focused her photography on families and children. Her adorable children's work has been featured on greeting cards and calendars around the world in major retail stores for over 15 years.

Susan has always loved nature and the outdoors and has a deep appreciation for fine art landscape and nature photography. It was only natural that at some point she would find her own niche in fine art photography. Susan's love for nature led to her intense passion and an unparalleled ability to capture the beauty of the flower. Her approach is different in that she photographs most of her floral subject in the studio rather than their natural environment. Susan feels that the controlled lighting brings out details often missed in flowers. She is especially attracted to the intense colors and textures that the studio lighting highlights. Many of her images have a very painterly quality that makes you wonder, how did she do that? Many wonder, is that a photograph or a painting? As an experienced painter Susan loves that quality in her photography and credits her many years of lighting experience to the painterly appearance of her work.

Flowers are one of the most sought after fine art genres. Susan's images have become collectable almost immediately and she looks forward to all of the exciting possibilities as she pursues her passion for the art of flower photography. She is currently working on her first book that will feature more than 150 of her most beautiful and interesting images.

Susan holds the coveted Master of Photography degree from Professional Photographers of America. She has served on PPA's board for ten years and currently serves this organization of over 28,000 professional members, as Chairman of the Board.

Master of Photography Professional Photographers of America

Photographic Craftsman Professional Photographers of America

Imaging Excellence Award Professional Photographers of America

Certified Professional Photographer

Florida Service Award

Florida Education Degree

Florida Degree of Photographic Excellence

Society of Twenty-Five Member

Board of Directors Professional Photographers of America

President Professional Photographers of America

President North Florida Professional Photographers

Professional Photographers of America Speaker

Professional Photographers of Canada Speaker

When I stand before God

At the end of my life,

I would hope that I would not have

A single bit of talent left, and could say,

"I used everything you gave me". Erma Bombeck