

# Trading Places

By Kristy Steeves, M.Photog, M.Artist, Cr, CPP, F-ASP

My life shattered in an instant. I had just come home, mentally drained and physically exhausted, from another grueling day at work. I don't remember thinking anything at all as I sat down at the kitchen table. I just stared into space. That's when I heard the door open and my husband walk in. As I turned to look at him I felt a physical force, like heavy gravity, pushing me down toward the ground. It was crushing. In what felt like slow motion, I softly breathed the words "I am so depressed" and my mind collapsed into ruin. No sooner than the words were said, I lost control and started crying hysterically. The sobs came from somewhere so deep, so dark, and so suppressed, it was like a crack in a dam had ruptured and the waterworks spilled out violently. Everything in its path lay waste. I was broken.

Twenty-five years as a broadcast journalist had taken a toll on me. I had been a hard news reporter for most of my career – what we in the industry call a "crime beat reporter." It had become my area of expertise: digging deep into police investigations, developing sources, and navigating a complex criminal justice system. As a result of covering every crime imaginable, I saw a lot of blood, gore, and often death as well as coming face-to-face with violent life-and-death situations myself. One time a videographer and I were shot at after being trapped in the middle of gang warfare. We both thought we were going to die! I was hit by a car and spent a month in a neck brace before returning to work. I have been physically assaulted more than once during riots. One time, I was terrified to find I had a stalker who I was sure was going to hurt or kill me after I repeatedly turned down his advances. He followed me for quite some time, even showing up one night at my doorstep. I had to get the police involved but it still took too long for him to go away.

Nightmares haunted my sleep every evening. I'm talking stuff that would make the worst horror movie look like fluff. I was on call around the clock and worked every holiday. The stress of being under minute-to-minute, ever-changing deadlines was intense. I hated being forced out into blizzards for hours at a time with no reprieve from the cold. I've suffered excruciating frost bite. In addition to the demands of the job, I was also sexually harassed and assaulted by one of my superiors at work. I managed to weather it all ... until I witnessed a botched prison execution. Watching someone suffer as they were put to death by lethal injection sent me into a tailspin. That's when I was diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

My love of being a storyteller had kept me going all of those years despite the physical, mental and emotional hardships. From my earliest recollections I have always enjoyed creating stories through art and the written word. I used to draw cartoon caricatures of people along with writing poems and short stories with characters I created from my imagination. In the eighth grade I won a national writing competition. At my high school graduation I walked the stage to accept the school's art award. In college I majored in journalism and political science with the starry-eyed goal of being a war correspondent. That dream quickly evaporated after dealing with the horrors and sadness that I witnessed on the streets of Cleveland. I preferred writing and telling happy

stories about people but those were few and far between in an industry that thrives on negative sensationalism.

The toxic cycle of gloom-and-doom finally caught up with me. The moment I had my mental meltdown, a force had taken hold of me so completely that I felt paralyzed. I later learned that I was suffering from a debilitating depression. I couldn't function. I ended up seeing a medical doctor and a psychologist. I resigned from my position as a broadcast journalist. I left behind a successful career, a steady paycheck and a personal identity so ingrained in my being that if you had asked me who I was, I would have simply stated "A journalist". I was so attached to this identifying trait that I never imagined doing anything else; but life has a way of throwing in an unexpected curve ball. That particular curve ball came at me in the form of a nervous breakdown so hard and so fast that I didn't even have time to swing and miss. I just stood there like an idiot when it slammed into me at full force, knocking the wind out of me and laying me flat on my back. Man, that pitcher had one hell of an arm!

That was in 2009. Two years earlier I had started doing wedding photography. Documenting a bride and groom's union on the weekends served as a happy reprieve from the gloom and doom I experienced as a reporter. I even started telling my coworkers that if I had life to do over again I would have been a photographer. Funny how fate has a way of working itself out. After parting ways with the news business it took me more than a year to painstakingly dig my way out of the dismal melancholy. I felt like I was in a deep, muddy cesspool that kept sucking me back down every time I tried to crawl out. My doctor suspected that due to the severity of my depression, I'd been in a bad place for years. It took every ounce of what little willpower I had left to claw my way up and out of that hole. It was rocky at first; but I started to get my footing once I made the ultimate decision to trade places with the camera. I would no longer be in front of a camera. I would now be behind one looking through the lens.

I forced myself to join a professional photography organization in my area and although I didn't feel like socializing, I attended my first event. That was the best decision I ever made. "What's your specialty?" I heard a man's voice pierce through the haze cluttering my brain. I looked to my right. A stranger, standing next to me, was smiling. "What do you like to do?", he queried, looking at me intently. I had this feeling his eyes were boring into my soul.

"I, um, I, ah, I do weddings" I stammered. With a sense of excitement, his rapid fire questioning caught me off guard.

"Do you have a studio?"

"No."

"Would you like one?"

I shrugged, "Uh, sure I guess." The thought of having a studio had never crossed my mind.

Without missing a beat this effervescent man proclaimed, “I’ll help you!”

My jaw became unhinged and drooped slightly. Is this guy for real? I wasn’t sure, but okay, I’m game. That was my first encounter with the Energizer bunny disguised as a photographer named Denny Valentine. This man was one of four photographers who literally materialized out of nowhere offering to mentor me. Each one provided a different skill set that I desperately needed as a budding business owner and artist.

There’s a saying that resonates strongly with me: “Each friend represents a world in us, a world possibly not born until they arrive; and it is only by this meeting that a new world is born.” This quote couldn’t be more appropriate when applied to the photographers I have met. My new world was born the day I decided to trade places with the camera and a series of influential people walked into my life. These people are like George Bailey, the main character in the 1947 classic movie *It’s a Wonderful Life*. George has this powerfully positive impact on the residents of his hometown. By helping them, he unknowingly changes their lives for the better and sets them on a course they would have never traveled.

My mentors are like George Baileys to me. One of them is Karen Smith. She unwittingly set me on a path that would forever alter the direction of my photography career. Some time ago Karen saw a client image on my blog site and she encouraged me to enter PPA’s International Photographic Competition for the first time. To my delight that image was accepted into the Loan Collection. I quickly learned the value of competition as an educational tool. It became an important part of my life. Until that point, all of my work had been flat lit. That was all I knew. The image that Loaned was actually a fluke. I had photographed a woman who suffered from alopecia. Despite having lost all of her hair, she was beautiful beyond words. My excitement over getting to photograph such a unique looking person quickly turned to dread when my fill light wouldn’t fire. Internally I freaked out when I noticed a shadow on her face. You know that saying “never let your clients see you sweat?” Well, I was perspiring. I thought the images I saw on the back of my camera looked horrible and my client would be thoroughly disappointed. As calmly as possible, I did everything I could to get the fill light working. It would not cooperate so I had no choice but to keep going. When Karen suggested I enter the woman’s image in competition I thought she was crazy. Turns out she wasn’t. She had just introduced me to a whole new world. That was my first real lesson in using shadows to create depth in my images and the end of flat lighting for me. I took a lot of photography workshops after that. I found myself gravitating toward instructors who specialized in low key, high contrast, dramatic lighting. I was fascinated with this chiaroscuro effect, and being able to sculpt a client’s face and body with the placement of my lighting equipment. Eventually I began to develop a style with a bent toward black and white photography ... and visual storytelling.

My struggles, however, continued for some time. I had worked my way up the ladder as a reporter and I had been at the top of my game. With photography I found myself back on the bottom rung and I didn’t like it. I often questioned my decision to venture into a profession that

is much harder than I ever anticipated. I floundered and often felt like quitting. Another one of my mentors, Andy Fiala, gave me some advice that kept me on the straight and narrow. He said that many photographers go through what I was experiencing. “The truly successful photographers work through their frustrations, disappointments and failures by staying focused,” he told me. “Eventually, through perseverance and hard work, they come out the other end of the tunnel.” So I hung in there, hoping to see the light at the end of my tunnel.

I labored seven days a week for seven years in an attempt to learn as much as I could about photography. Fortunately, I have an understanding husband who tolerated the long hours and my incessant determination to climb back up the ladder. He saw how happy I was compared to how miserable I had been in the news industry. I became a Certified Professional Photographer before earning my Master of Photography and Photographic Craftsman degrees.

A little later I reluctantly agreed to become president of a local guild in Ohio. That’s when my evolution as a visual storyteller shifted. It occurred when I was writing personal stories about each of our members for a newly created website directory page. I spent a lot of time getting to know each photographer through lengthy interviews. I relished the idea of writing about these people in a way they couldn’t do themselves. I could toot their horns and give them praise using my experience as a journalist. I ended up creating a special theme for each member’s story based on their personalities or something that resonated with them.

Then it happened. The proverbial lightbulb not only lit up in my head but exploded in what felt like fireworks. As I was writing one of the stories a thought came to me: I envisioned creating a character about that photographer involving their theme. I started thinking about all of the other themes I had created for our members and the flood gates burst open with such force I couldn’t shut it off. Character after character after character presented themselves in my mind. The thought of creating these personas resonated deeply within my soul. I was giddy with excitement.

This character-based photography project spanned the course of four years. Some of the sessions took place in my studio while others were on location. Then, as my outreach expanded, I worked in various states around the country using other photographers’ studio lighting equipment and backgrounds. I learned a great deal by forcing myself to stretch my limits. I stepped out of my comfort zone and faced some challenging situations head on. What I gained from this project is immeasurable. I ended up creating visual stories of 45 photographers from 14 states around the country. I entered a good number of those images into PPA’s International Photographic Competition as a body of work. The title of the album was *Trading Places*. Just like I had done years earlier when I traded one life experience for another, so too did these photographers when they stepped out from behind their cameras and in front of mine.

These images are now part of my ASP Fellowship portfolio. Two of the photographers in it were my mentors. One of them is Denny Valentine. His character is the *Teacher*. He was the one who offered assistance in setting up my studio. Dan Swain, who helped me tremendously by teaching

me Photoshop and other essential skills, is the other mentor in my portfolio. This guy is a die-hard Steeler to the core, so he's the *Avid Sports Fan*.

Without these George Baileys in my life I know I would not have made it as a photographer and business owner. I was, and still am, eternally grateful but I also had an insatiable longing to give back to them. For years I felt that I didn't have the skills to return a favor. Still I helped all of my mentors any way I could: working as a second shooter at weddings, or loaning lights and backgrounds any time they needed them or helping to set up their booths at trade shows. I felt it was a far cry from the knowledge they had imparted to me and I was frustrated I could not do more.

At one point I hired Dan Swain to work for me at a wedding. The bride wanted a second shooter so I thought this would be a great way to provide him with the extra income. In what seemed like a strange turn of events, I saw Dan intently watching me work my lights at the reception. He seemed intrigued. Then he started asking questions. I explained what I was doing and why. He told me he hadn't seen lighting done that way before. He soaked up everything I had to say with a voracious appetite. Then, to my surprise, Dan signed up to take one of my PPA sponsored photography workshops. I was nervous. Here was my mentor, someone who had taught me, someone I looked up to, coming to take my course on lighting. What did I have to offer that he didn't already know? I was worried I would disappoint him. A couple of weeks after the class Dan sent me an image of a groom that he took at a wedding. He had done profile lighting and said he learned it from me. Oh my gosh! This was huge! My first glimmer of hope at finally being able to give back to my mentor.

But wait! It gets better. Dan needed to borrow a background so I loaned him two. When his sessions were over we rendezvoused at a coffee shop so I could retrieve my belongings. We sat and talked for a while. He handed me his cell phone saying he wanted to show me an image. I looked at it and my jaw dropped. I peered over at Dan and asked "Is this your image?" He nodded. Then he showed me more images. I was blown away. "Dan, these are incredible!" I said. They were stunning images of high school seniors. Some of the best I've seen. My mentor responded: "I learned all of this from you". My breath caught in my chest. My heart may have stopped beating momentarily with the enormity of what he just stated. My eyes pooled up with emotion. I looked up at Dan. He had tears running down his cheeks. Seeing him like that tipped the scales. I lost it. Tears of joy flowed freely onto my face. In that instant I felt this incredible connection between us. He knew what this meant to me without us having to say a word. I was finally able to give back. I had something to offer, to return his gift in kind. I was moved beyond words. When it was time for us to part ways, we hugged and said our goodbyes. I stepped out of the coffee shop with a heart overflowing with gratitude. I suddenly burst out crying – not weeping but all-out, gut-wrenching, loud, violent wails. I had to get from there to my car knowing people would stare at me. They did, with looks of great concern. I was utterly inconsolable. I made a mad dash for the privacy of my car. I got in, closed the door, and bawled my heart out. I cried for the longest time. So much energy escaped with those tears along with feelings that laid dormant inside of me. I said a prayer out loud: "Thank you God for giving me

this precious moment. Thank you for the gift of being able to return a kindness and make a difference.” I finally had something to offer. I no longer felt useless, inadequate or meaningless. I had come full circle. I could now be George Bailey to someone else. In fact, making a positive difference in others’ lives is extremely important to me ... and gratifying. To this day I continue paying it forward through teaching and mentoring others.

There are two other women who have also played a George Bailey role in my life: Jean Marie Poland and Nancy Bailey-Pratt. They are the ones who encouraged me – pushed me, actually – to apply for the ASP Fellowship Degree. In my portfolio Nancy is the *World Traveler*. Her character revolves around her love of different cultures and the people she photographed for her Fellowship portfolio. Jean is aptly named *Party Girl* since she is always happy, friendly, and the life of the party.

I have learned a lot about myself through this whole process. My personal paper, in itself, has been a daunting task but well worth the effort. I’ve had to think about my journey. What is it that really makes me tick? Why do I do what I do? How does it all come together in the summation of my work? It’s been transformative on so many levels. It is like putting the pieces of a puzzle together. Once you figure out where the pieces have come from and how they fit, everything becomes much clearer.

This all got me thinking: what if I had quit photography when the going got rough? I would not have become the person I am today. What if I had never served as president of my local guild? This whole project, where I shared incredible moments with some interesting characters, would have never happened. What if I hadn’t participated in photographic competition? I would not have evolved as a visual storyteller. One thing is for sure: I have learned through this journey to not say “no” to opportunities that arise. Taking risks, pushing ourselves out of our comfort zones, and facing our fears can become stepping stones designed to pave a path toward an unforeseen future filled with insights, growth, and successes beyond our wildest imaginations.

There’s a great line from the movie, *It’s a Wonderful Life*, when Clarence the Angel is talking to George: “Strange, isn’t it? Each man’s life touches so many other lives. When he isn’t around he leaves an awful hole, doesn’t he?” I hate to think of the hole I would be in right now if all of my George Baileys had not come into my life. These are people who pushed me, encouraged me, taught me, and supported me through everything. Funny that it took a nervous breakdown to alter my world. I cannot imagine where I would be right now if that had not happened. Most importantly, I would not have benefited from valuable life lessons that transformed me into someone who is happy, inspired and motivated to enjoy every moment that life has to offer. As devastating as it was at the time, trading places with the camera was the best thing that ever happened to me.