

June 2012

## Dave Moser

By Louisa J. Curtis



Walter, #0072 & Cindy, #0044

This month my conversation is with Philadelphia-based photographer [Dave Moser](#). I met Dave and his daughter Ruby when I was one of the judges for the ASMP Philadelphia Chapter's annual photo contest a couple of years ago. And, I'm a big fan of his work so I'm delighted to be writing about him this month.

I began by asking Dave to tell me more about a current portrait project he has been working on, and how exactly had he landed the assignment? Was it an existing client, or someone he wanted to work for, or perhaps it came out of left field? **This is a personal project for the Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of an investment company. I have worked with this company through a design firm since 1999, and in the last few years I became friends with the president. He is an art collector and his tastes are changing and really opening up as to what he considers art. He looked at my portfolio and was moved by my personal project I did a few years back with [The Doe Fund](#), a highly successful transitional program for recovering addicts, ex-cons and formerly homeless.**

He invited me to have a show at his company to celebrate their 25th anniversary. I was honored. He then asked me to photograph him and two folks who have worked for him for years in the same style. If you have not seen the style, it is pretty intense. The final images are fairly aggressive black and white conversions printed 16x24 of just their faces; there is no shortage of detail. He felt they presented a raw honesty and a nakedness that was compelling. After hanging up two of the three, he enthusiastically showed them off and then in early January I got a very excited email from him stating that he would like to hire me to shoot 25 commissioned portraits of his closest friends and family to hang in his office as a permanent installation. He waited to hang his own portrait up until midway through the project, as he felt it might be perceived as vain.

Since then it has grown to 50, he has moved light switches to fit in more folks, installed track lighting and is now surrounded by the faces of the people he feels most connected to, all walks of life and very different connections. This man has no shortage of deep relationships and is really unique and inspirational. The images are not complimentary in any expected way, but his friends and family made it clear they would do anything for him. In terms of the images, because their appearance has been somewhat deconstructed into intense high contrast black and white detail they are a bit of a shock, but what I hope for, and what he feels from these portraits, is the energy these people put forth, their unique gift to us. Stripping away the expected vanity of a portrait and asking the viewer to deal with what my experience of that person was, again, their energy. When you see the portraits in context it really starts making sense, you get used to the style of the work and begin to see past their appearances.



*Joe, #0078 & Casey, #0124*

I asked Dave what have been the most challenging aspects of this project for him, and also the most rewarding? Getting to know this man has been a gift. We get together weekly to review the work, initially he did much of the editing, which was odd for me, but now it is much more of a conversation and collaboration between us. To see how fast he changes what he likes and why, he is constantly processing and searching, and with enormous amounts of energy. His enthusiasm is intoxicating and he is relentless in his ventures. He is a very generous man in all aspects of the word. Now if that's not enough, I have the gift of spending time with 49 of the most amazing people (number 50 will be my self portrait), and because this project is for him, it seems to grant me faster access to the subjects. I have roughly half an hour to photograph these folks and it's never enough time as I find them all so fascinating. One of the city's top lawyers who cried in front of me over a dear lost pet, a man who worked side by side with Mother Theresa, a shoe shine of 45 years, a philosopher mathematician who is guided by religion. The list goes on.

I don't know about the readers, but I would certainly be fascinated to see these portraits, so I asked if there are any other plans with the project, to take it further than his client's office, by any chance? He is planning on publishing a book and giving all subjects a framed print of themselves as well as a copy of the book. He is changing out prints as his tastes change, re-editing, re-ordering. He is as excited about the project now as when he first sent me the email back in January! They will be live on my site within the next month or so as well.

I wanted to know how important is humor for Dave. It seems to feature in the website, and his fabulously creative and memorable promotions, and so on, but not always so blatantly in the work itself? So how does he balance the funny and the serious sides of himself? Humor is access, which sounds manipulative, but it feels good to make someone laugh, and it disarms them. So many of the people we photograph are already outside of their comfort zone, it's an opportunity to connect.

Although I take my work very seriously, it's a fun job, and the best part of my job is making the images. By the time we get to the shoot I'm in a great mood, everything else is handled (the business end rarely enters into a shoot day), so all I have to deal with is some gear and the people. I love people, and I really enjoy a bit of whimsy whether in banter or in imagery. To get back to the question, I believe people get into this business to have fun, there's easier ways of making money. I find people really appreciate some humor, particularly in marketing and promotions, and this can remind them of why they chose this path on a trying day. I want people to know I enjoy what I do. The time we spend together on campaigns is intense and often we work long hours, and without humor it could be less than pleasant.

So then I asked him if he had a funniest moment from a photo shoot? Just about everything gets pretty funny after a 15-hour day, and we've had quite a few of those! And for these 15-hour days, do you have an essential piece of photographic gear that you always carry with you, your "must-have" item, and also the most important non-photographic item? I always enjoy the answers to this question, and Dave's response did not disappoint! No idea, aside from a camera what else would be essential? As far as non-photographic, my glasses perhaps? I have become useless without them.





*Tom, #0005 & Pam, #0430*

I was curious to know when Dave had started taking photographs and what would he do if he weren't a photographer? I was on vacation with my family as a young child in New Hampshire photographing waves crashing on rocks with my plastic Satellite Camera my father gave me. It was a 120 camera and I was shooting B&W. I was waiting for the perfect moment, knowing I only had a few chances. Later I clearly remembered this moment as it was probably the first time I was consumed and so focused, it was a very freeing feeling. This has stuck with me throughout my life. I've asked myself what else would I do over the years, I have no answer. When I am taking pictures the world falls away, all is right in the world and I have no needs. I know I am doing the right thing and am very focused. It's like a "Zen energy", what more could I ask for? Honestly, I get a little crazy if I don't shoot. Dave is an Aquarius, born February 10th, so photography is indeed a very natural profession for him. Aquarius is ruled by the Planet Uranus, which is connected to the ether, and ultimately the "light" and without light, we would have no photography. I also asked Dave to give me some of his photographic heroes: Nadav Kander, Emmet Gowin, Irving Penn, Eugene Meatyard, Josef Koudelka, Richard Avedon, and Dan Winters.

I'm always interested in hearing about personal projects, and it's not every day that a dream client like Dave's comes along with such a rewarding project, so I wanted to know how important was it for him (or any photographer) to be shooting personal work? Critical! My personal work has not only opened doors, but has created a strong momentum that continues even when we have less commissioned jobs. It keeps my spirits up and my skills sharp. It makes me happy and keeps me out of my head. When I show my work people are fascinated by the personal work and really enjoy seeing my passion about it. This is why I became a photographer, to take images of what inspires me, to explore the world through my craft.

So how do your personal projects come about? Where do you get your inspiration and ideas? Do you keep a journal? I am not totally clear where the ideas come from, but I am interested in changing the way people see other people. I do not claim to have succeeded in this, but I really like to dream of the greatest outcome when embarking on a new project. The last few projects, and what seems like a thread throughout my career, have been to show dignity and inspire understanding from my images of people. I feel when you understand someone, not necessarily agree with them but understand them; it is impossible to hate them. Stereotypes become inaccurate, and we at the very least, start making exceptions to these stereotypes with the recognition of individuality. This probably sounds odd, but I really fall in love with the people I am photographing, as I get to know them. It all comes full circle.



*Sabrina, #0519 & Fred, # 5302*

And last but not least we have the **ChatterDozen** quick questions:

- 1) What is your favorite day of the week, and why? Sunday, it's typically a low-key day, a catch up day after a busy week when I can spend time with my family.
- 2) What is your favorite TV show? We stream The Walking Dead. I usually avoid gore, violence and suspense but the story, characters and production are so good I have to watch it!
- 3) What was the last movie your saw? The Wizard of Oz, we do not have a TV and we profoundly limit my daughter's time with screens and mass media. It took us three attempts and nine months to get through the movie as she had a hard time separating the MGM lion from the movie. It was amazing how threatening the lion is when you see it in that context. Normally I would not have pushed it, but I felt she needed to see it at nine years old, for cultural literacy alone.
- 4) Give me a favorite word, and why? Balligomingo (a local road), because it's fun to say. On that note tabernacle is also pretty good. There's a local rock called Wissahickon Shist - that's pretty great too! Wissahickon Schist is the predominant bedrock underlying the Philadelphia region – who knew?
- 5) And how about three words that describe your creative style? Spontaneous, playful and energetic OR unexpected, emotional and with dignity/understanding. I would much rather hear what other folks have to say though.
- 6) What is your favorite music, song, or band? John Zorn, Brian Jonestown Massacre, Slayer, Mark Lanegan, field recordings of Old Spirituals, Old Gospel, Old Work Songs. As far as specific songs go, currently Time Trade by Jeffrey Lewis
- 7) How about your favorite animal? Aside from dogs, Polar Bears (which makes perfect sense when you read Dave's answer to my next question!)
- 8) If you could get on a plane tomorrow, and go anywhere you wanted to and perhaps somewhere you've never been before, where would you fly to and why? Greenland, I have had a long time fascination with the poles and Greenland is populated by a native culture. This particular Inuit culture fascinates me (along with the mix of the more sparse European culture and it's complex conflict with the Inuit) as well as the landscape and extremes in light, the dark winter being social and the best time to travel. The word "sila" means weather and consciousness simultaneously, which I think gives some insight.
- 9) What is your favorite food? Anything I haven't had recently, I love ethnic cuisine, any kind.
- 10) And your favorite color? Purple, but It's about color combinations for me, so right now it's Silver and a dusky warm Purple. These are the colors of our bedroom (w/white trim and a deep purple accent wall). I remember painting the bedroom these colors when my wife was in the hospital, pregnant. I was thinking I'm going to be sleeping in a girl's room, but it's really grown on me. Kudos to Loretta my wife!
- 11) If I handed you an Oscar for photography, whom would you be thanking in your acceptance speech? Sean Wilkinson (my teacher from College), Ian Summers (my Coach), my wife Loretta and my daughter Ruby, Rich Merriman (my friend and client), Chris Crisman (former employee, valued friend, great photographer) and Mom and Dad, of course!
- 12) And besides these key people for your acceptance speech, who else (dead or alive) do you admire? Gandhi, Sir Richard Branson, Martin Luther King Jr., Václav Havel, Abraham Lincoln, Nelson Mandela. Someone I met recently explained that great people are not born great, but do great things - it's in the action, not in the person. I found this to be humbling and inspiring. I often find myself moved by the people I meet, people who are driven by vision and are seemingly fearless. It's astounding how many folks are like this. I am also deeply moved by people in transition, to me, change is a large component of heroism. I think I read this in the Tao of Pooh.