

# When Your Pastime Becomes Your Profession

By Victoria L. Herring

**T**oday, I am a fine arts photographer and focus on architectural imagery and travel photography. But I wasn't always so. I always knew I wanted to be a lawyer.

My father was a lawyer, and I remember being enthralled by what he did (or what I *thought* he did) when I was just five. Not that I didn't alter my career choices over time—teacher, archaeologist, architect, and back to teacher—but each choice was similar in some way to my ultimate career in the law. Each involved some element of creativity and a responsibility for protecting and advancing knowledge and the interests of others. Even as I thought of these careers, during my youth and into young adulthood I continued to be involved in the visual arts, either through oil or acrylic painting or in my own rudimentary photography (it helped that my father also enjoyed photography and was quite good). I attended a liberal arts college that provided me with an excellent education and life skills. While there, I was able to stay involved in the arts, in-

cluding photography.

After college and some time in the “real world,” an actual career choice beckoned, and I entered and graduated from law school and settled down to practice law in Des Moines, Iowa. Every couple of years or so I wondered about the wisdom of my choice, but when I checked in with my law school mentor, I learned that such feelings of inadequacy or erroneous career choice came every now and then. He counseled that I would withstand the uncertainties and stress of these worries over time. He pointed out that it is natural to question one's life choices occasionally, and perhaps even healthy to do so.

So, I stuck it out and continued in the practice of law, and as I did enjoy it and found fulfillment in representing my clients, it wasn't a difficult decision. My mentor's advice was nevertheless helpful because I'd reassess my life and career occasionally, changing my milieu from a law firm (where I was an associate), to the Iowa Attorney General's office (where I was the assistant attorney general assigned to the Iowa Civil Rights Commission), and finally to a solo practice. Thanks to my time in the Iowa Attorney General's office, I developed into an advocate in the realm of civil rights and discrimination, doing my little bit to contribute to that area of the law. Later, I came to enjoy the creativity, responsibility, and advocacy of my solo practice, and I felt relatively fulfilled, not to mention more in control of my time. During this time I took classes in the arts (including photography) in the community and traveled and took rolls

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## Working from home opened up time for me to explore my “right brain.”

and rolls of film of those travels, with a wish that I held stock in Kodak!

As other lawyers know, a sole practitioner must be open to all sorts of cases and challenges, but over time I have been able to steadily narrow and develop my practice into one focused on cases in the field of civil rights and discrimination law. At about this time, I also became married and also focused my energies on our family (husband, three stepchildren, two children, and cats); my enjoyment in photography had to take a back seat. However, as these pieces came together, my life was fulfilling, exciting, meaningful, and busy. All this time, I wasn't heavily engaged in the arts or photography, but from time to time I took photography classes at the local art center; I viewed it as a pastime and not a career option or choice.

A slight shift in my practice occurred in the mid-2000s when I realized that I was carrying too large a caseload and too large a staff (three part-time paralegals and three law clerks). I do tend to function most efficiently under stress and pressure but had not realized (or else, had forgotten) that a sole practitioner should be careful not to become overextended. The stress of a six-person staff, the experience of a two-week federal jury trial resulting in a judgment for my client that then was whisked away on appeal, and the demands of a variety of deadlines and those of my family was taking its toll. So, I scaled back, cut staff through attrition, and moved my office to practice law from home during our kids' middle school years. And I continued to find a creative outlet in taking photographs whenever we were able to travel.

Working from home was a wise decision; it also opened up time for me to explore my “right brain.” For years, I'd been the analytical lawyer using her “left brain,” but all the time enjoying and reveling in right-brain activities—listening to music, visiting art galleries, taking photographs of well-known things in an unknown manner. Now I had time both to practice law with my left brain and also develop my right-brain interests and talents. This all came to fruition in 2005, when I entered a photograph in the Downtown Des Moines photography contest and was se-

lected as one of the winners.

My entry for the competition was a photograph of the Des Moines Art Center; the image was somewhat abstract in nature, catching a Henry Moore sculpture in its red glory, the Center's Meier Wing in its shining whiteness, and the brilliant blue sky that day. I was surprised, proud, and excited that my photograph was judged to show something about Des Moines that perhaps others had not yet seen, even though the Art Center was there every day, observable to all.

That was the spark. I'm a normal human being, and praise and accolades frequently encourage and prompt one to do more. Not that I wasn't finding similar positive feedback from the practice of law, but this was something new and different, and it spoke to an emotional part of me that wasn't nurtured quite enough by the law. I loved the intellectual challenge of the law and the sense of doing good for others, but I lacked a sense of emotional fulfillment. So, I decided to become more involved in my avocation; I purchased a better camera, took more photographs, attended classes, and subscribed to too many magazines to try to learn about techniques and how best to become an accomplished photographer. I had and have no interest in the art of portrait photography but find challenge and excitement in photographs of life in the “real world”—people, places, buildings, and things that offer an interesting pattern or a different view.

Fortunately, this increasing involvement in my photography dovetailed exactly with something our family had developed, a love of and ability to travel. My husband (also a lawyer) and I would go away, mostly to places in Europe, for week-long trips while the kids visited their uncle in Carroll, Iowa. We'd make our own plans, pack my camera and film (at the time I was on the cusp of digital photography and, thankfully, pushed over that edge very quickly), and travel to France, Italy, Turkey, Spain, and elsewhere. Each time we went, I returned from trips with hundreds of images, but I could not bring myself to part with any of them. Many *were* excellent shots, but obviously, there are only a few “special”

images from any one trip. The rest could and should have been packed away in the archives. I realized that I couldn't just take photographs without learning how to work with them and find the few gems among many.

I decided that I'd keep practicing law, but my "hobby" would be my avocation and I'd try to become better at it. I fully expected to continue this way and retire from being a lawyer in the far distant future. So, I upgraded my camera equipment again, upgraded my computer and software (using Apple computers, I bought Aperture and tried to learn how to organize and edit images for the maximum effect), and kept traveling with my husband and our kids. We would use the slow holiday period at year's end to take everyone somewhere overseas or in the Western United States. Then, I took a fateful trip, alone, to Asia.

Back in 2001, some friends had wanted to hike in the country of Bhutan, and we went through with all the difficult arrangements, took our shots, and worked to build up our stamina. I planned not only to hike, but also to practice my photography along the way. We were all excited to go, only to have our excitement stunted by the events of 9/11. We each returned to our jobs and careers, disappointed but realizing that it just wasn't a good time to travel thousands of miles away to an unknown country. Time went on, and a few years later I again became interested in Bhutan, but this time with the thought of taking a photography workshop, seeing the people and country, and learning better ways of taking photographs. In fact, 2006 was to be my photographic "coming out party." That year was filled with photography-centered events. I continued to practice law but had better control over fewer cases.

Loving Venice, I traveled there in January 2006, took a two-day photography workshop, and expanded my knowledge and horizons. Then, in May I went to Bhutan for a very special and literally eye-opening photographic workshop over a two-week period of driving with 13 other people through the country on its passable road (yes, it has *one* road, which bisects the country from east to

west), with stop-offs for Bangkok prior to and Beijing at the end of the trip. In the fall it was back to Venice for a week with women friends exploring the city, again taking a day out for another workshop with my teacher of earlier that year. There is something about being involved in a fairly structured setting, such as tutelage or a workshop, that brings out the best in you as a photographer and expands your reach. At least that's true in my case.

When I returned from Italy and Bhutan, I wondered if I couldn't make this avocation financially sustain itself, at least in part. I could keep my "day job" but become increasingly involved in fine art photography as a business. I was also motivated by the positive feedback and the enjoyment others got from my images. With the help of friends, I became involved in a gallery in the East Village of Des Moines; I displayed some of my images there and in another gallery in another city over several years. I also entered into photography competitions and was juried into recognized art shows in the Des Moines area. I started to build not only my inventory of images but also the variety of materials and display mechanisms needed to have an attractive and professional-looking photographic presentation at these shows.

It certainly helped to have friends at this time. Just as my friends sustained and supported me when I entered the solo practice of law many years ago, they did likewise with my launch into the field of photographic art. Not that my images weren't or aren't worth purchasing, but as with anything else the support and encouragement of friends meant a great deal. One allowed me to set up a tent in front of her shop during the Downtown Farmer's Market; although it is not the perfect venue for art sales, I was and am proud of what I accomplished that summer. Other friends bought images, both matted and framed, as well as cards; they placed orders and generally kept me positive about this shift in my focus.

By this time I had been juried into shows in other cities and was practicing law as well, but on a more limited scale. When I began to operate my law practice from home, I completed what cases I

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could and encouraged and assisted some clients to find and retain new counsel; our children being in their teens, I thought it was best to be available at home and not rushing off to a law office elsewhere. I also moved from the risks (and rewards) of a contingency fee to an hourly rate. The upshot of that was to limit greatly the number of prospective clients interested in hiring me to assist them in civil rights and discrimination matters. That was fine. Although I still enjoyed my law practice, I wanted a less demanding workload, more steady income, and less stress. The steady growth of my photography business (not profit, but growth nonetheless) added to my contentment.

Over the next few years I continued along this path. Our family enjoyed travel and I kept shooting photographs, returning home with one or two thousand images to review and choose from, to work with on the computer, and then to print. When not traveling and otherwise involved in photography, I practiced law and worked on civil rights and discrimination cases in the agencies and in federal court and on appeal. My left brain was engaged, my right brain was happy.

No doubt this involvement in two fulfilling pastimes and careers would have continued until and beyond formal retirement age. I was starting to think of equal-

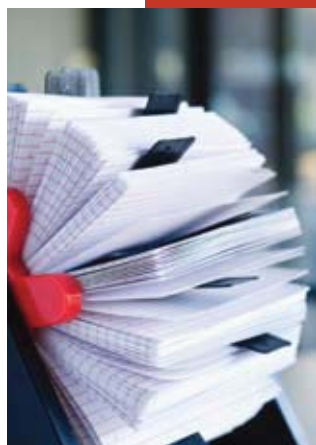
izing the two professional halves of my life and raising my avocation to the status of a vocation, but that plan was years in the future. Then, in the fall of 2008, our 20-year-old son died suddenly. As might be understood, a total reexamination of my life ensued. At that time, I was uninterested in taking on representation of new clients and complicated cases. Again, I was able to facilitate the transfer of some cases and clients to other lawyers and focus on fewer cases; I pledged not to take on new endeavors for at least one year and referred out prospective clients. I reexamined my life and how I wanted to spend the next 20-plus years.

During this period of reexamination, I realized that my ability to concentrate with a laser focus and to be quickly improvisational at trial had evaporated. I could still practice law, but the demands of in-depth representation of a person from their initial contact through to settlement, trial, and, possibly, an appeal, no longer was sufficiently interesting or, perhaps, even possible. As I complete the one-year pledge of no new clients, that pledge may well continue and become permanent.

What I have found fulfilling and really enjoy doing is taking photographs, working with them in the computer (mainly adding levels of black/gray/white and cropping to produce a certain composition), and printing them. Obviously, I have a trove of photographs from the years before Ryan's death, as a result of various family trips but also the many workshops taken. Since then even more images have been added, and my ability to discern the best and discard the others has improved. What started as a "leisure" activity has developed through the years to the level of an avocation and, finally, a part-time career. Now it is going to become my main role in life, although I continue to work on some legal issues for established clients and other lawyers. In effect, I've moved from the law as my main career and fulfillment to photography as my main career and fulfillment. My right brain has ascended and is in charge. Now, the next challenge is to find a way to have this new career benefit not only me, but others, and to have it truly become my "day job." **GPSOLO**

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