

An Interview with Mike Adkins

By Mark Hamilton

January 2010

Mark: Tell us a bit about yourself.

Mike: I have lived and played in Huntington West Virginia my entire life except for the time I served in the military. I have two daughters and four grand children. I have worked in



computers for the past thirty years, a passion that started before the days of personal computers. I have worked for the past eighteen years as a Lead Information Technology Specialist for the Department of Veterans Affairs and plan to retire in 2012. I started working with a work permit at age 14 and have held a number of different types of jobs, most technical in nature. I have worked for WSAZ as a technical engineer, Huntington Alloys as a furnace operator, at Cabell Huntington Hospital as an orderly, as a business owner of my own portrait studio and I have owned a successful computer business. I currently reside in Lavallette with my cat Ace.

Mark: You first joined the Ohio Valley Camera Club in the 1970s, right?

Mike: I got involved with the club as a recommendation from David Fattaleh and Barbara Sullivan. They recommended that I get involved to help me network with other local photographers and that I would learn a lot from them. Not only did I learn a lot, I developed some friendships that have lasted throughout the years. I also worked for Joe Thacker at Photoman in Ashland and I worked for Barbara Sullivan at American Studios before going to work in computers at Solutions Inc. I started as a computer technician and advanced to Vice President until the company was sold. When I started at Solutions, Inc, the job left little time for anything else so I set my love of photography aside for about 26 years. About four years ago I re-discovered the love and passion I have for photography and how much it and the great people in the club mean to me. OVCC is more than a club to me. It is like part of my family and the friendships are a large part of my life now.

Mark: What was the first camera that you owned?

Mike: My first camera was a Minolta SRT-101. I recently found it in a box when doing a photo on old cameras. I purchased it at the PX in Herzogenaurach Germany. I was doing some traveling around Germany with my wife and wanted to take some pictures to send home. I think what really got me into photography was not the camera but the [military] base photo lab. I was

fascinated by the process of developing my own film and pictures. Also, I was impressed by the man "Norman Lampfree" that ran the photo lab. Not an easy person to get to like but he did the most amazing pictures of people. To my delight, I still have a roll of film in the camera that I plan to process after some 30 years. It appears, other than needing a good cleaning, the camera still works great.

Mark: What other experiences do you believe helped foster your style of photography?

I am not sure if it was Norman Lampfree himself or his pictures that most stimulated my interest in portraiture. As I said, he was not the easiest person to befriend. But his photographs and style were amazing. He was hard on me but I kept after him and he started to open up and helped me learn. Before he let me in the studio he said I had to learn to control the sun. I had no idea what he was talking about at that time but continued to push forward. I would take some pictures of my wife or a model outside and when I printed them I was proud of what I had created. He would tear them up in front of anyone standing around and throw them back at me. But he then told me what I did wrong and had me go shoot the same shot again but this time get it right. I am not recommending anyone get a mentor such as this but I was determined to win him over and get him to like at least one thing that I did. I am not sure I ever did.



The second person who really took me under her wing and taught me the art of portraiture was Barbara Sullivan. She was working at the Sears Photo Studio on 29th Street when I got out of the military in 1974. I asked her if she would teach me to take beautiful pictures of people. She agreed in her wonderful style. We became great friends and I have worked under her guidance and wisdom in quite a few studios through the years. Mostly volunteer work or work for free just to learn. Barbara is a great and patient teacher with such a wealth of knowledge that I will never begin to learn a fraction of what she knows. She is truly the master and I am but a humble student.

Both of these people set me on a path of loving people photography. There is such beauty and emotion that is captured for life in portraiture. It is the most lasting of all art and the most meaningful. There is no form of photography that is more valued through generations and by so many people. I have a portrait of my grandmother that hangs over my bed. I took it of her thirty five years ago and it is one of my most treasured possessions. Each day I see it I think of her and with that portrait she will always be with me. I think of portraiture as an art form that last the

test of time. Artist such as Michelangelo and the Sistine Chapel, Leonardo da Vinci and his Mona Lisa, and Norman Rockwell and his American Illustrations were all portraits artist. It is, I think, the hardest form of photography to master but has the greatest reward.

Mark: What other photographs stand out as being your favorites?

I would say that my best photograph is still in my head. I have so many ideas about photos that I would need at least two lifetimes to take them all. And they just keep coming. I have started keeping a journal with me to jot them down so I will not forget. But to better answer your question, I would say the photos that I have taken that I like are the ones that others seem to like also. I want my photos to say something. To tell a story or stir some type of emotion. I like it when someone sees one of my prints and laughs or sighs or says wow. That I think is what most photographers strive for.

I really like my Rescue Shot where the little girl is being protected by the fireman till someone comes for her. I like it primarily because it took months to pull together. It strikes emotion in the viewer and I remember what a great time I had during the session. With all that went wrong



or all the problems that happened such as a fire alarm that caused us to break during the session so the firemen could go fight a fire. The fact that I had four little girls lined up to star in the shoot and all dropped out at the last minute. And that you found the perfect little girl for me at the very last minute. The fact that I had planned to show the fireman in the shot handing a teddy bear to the little girl but when she was brought on the set the fireman just walked up and handed the bear to her. I thought now there is no way I

can take the bear from her and have the fireman give it to her again. I thought the moment was lost. But to my surprise it could not have worked out better. The shot showed her clinching the Teddy Bear and the insecurity and uncertainty in her eyes was perfect.

You just never know what you are going to run into when staging one of these staged creative session and why I am pursuing more of them now.

Mark: How often do you get to photograph? Are you able to work photography into your everyday life?

Mike: Photography I think is like being a pilot. Once you solo it's in your blood. Even though I have not piloted an aircraft for a few years now I think about it every day. Photography is the same for me. It is in my blood and part of my thinking every day. I believe I have told you this before but I think the type of photography that I do is by far the hardest. I see the finished photo in my head and then try to create it. This comes from a high school friend who first got me interested in people art. He could draw girls like Vargas. He was a loner and kept to himself. He would never give anyone copies of his drawings. I kept after him to teach me to draw like that. Something I have never been able to really do well is draw people and that was something I had always wanted to do since meeting this high school buddy. Finally one day he invited me to his house and agreed to teach me. We sat down at his kitchen table with drawing pads in hand. He then told me all he does is trace the drawing. I ask, how do you do that? He said I see the picture on the page and I simply trace it. He could not understand that my brain was not wired that way so we parted friends.



I see images that I want to shoot in my head all the time now. Not well enough to draw them but in a photographic way. The more that I learn about photography the closer I get to making these images a reality. So I would prefer to plan my shot before ever picking up the camera. This is also something that Norman Lamfree told me. See the finished picture then pick up the camera. That's something that I try to do even now.



Mark: OK, time to air the laundry. Tell us about your biggest failure. Any shot that you missed that you'd love to do over again?

Mike: The second time I tried to do a staged photo shoot. It was the Radio Days shot. I had worked on it for quite some time and finally lined up the characters in the shot. We did the shoot at the Radio Museum in Harveytown, outside

Huntington. It failed because it looked staged. I made a lot of mistakes. The biggest one was shooting it on an actual stage with black curtains in the background.

Everything was good in the shot but the background. It failed to look like a home or apartment out of the same time period. So when people see the picture they ask if it was made from a play. The exact thing I did not want to represent.

I have learned that the image has to look like it was from real life. Do not put a lot of effects or over-light it. Keep it simple and the staged shot will not come out looking like a staged shot.

Mark: What artists (photographer or non-photographer do you admire)?

Mike: Glad you did not ask what artist is my favorite. That would be a very hard question. I have a lot of traditional artists that I admire and have influenced me. Norman Rockwell would



be at the top of that list. He visualized what he wanted in his final illustration before ever starting his work flow. Then he used a photographer to capture the characters as he staged and directed them so they would fit his vision. He would project the photos onto the canvas and trace them to get the composition the way he wanted it. I want to take his illustrations and try to recreate them into a photo that closely tells the story in his illustration. So it is coming full circle. As for photographers there are

quite a few that influence me because they work the way that I want to. They visualize the shot in their head before ever picking up the camera. Here is a list in no particular order but I follow their work daily: [Stephen Poff](#), [Chase Jarvis](#), [Hunter Freeman](#), [Annie Leibovitz](#), [Bryan Niven](#), [Joe McNally](#), and [Ryan Klos](#).

Mark: What projects do you have planned for the upcoming year?

Mike: I have a lot of location photo shoots in the planning. Some have been [in the works] for a very long time but not before now did I have the equipment to make them work. I am also working on a project that will combine photography, an audio interview, and music combined into a YouTube presentation that tells a story.

Mark: Oil and watercolor artists don't usually sit around talking about the brand of their brushes and canvas but sometimes it gives an insight of how the photographer works. What is in your camera bag right now?

Mike: Most of my shooting outside of my home studio is shot with a Pentax K10D and the 18 to 55 lens. This is an extremely versatile and under rated camera. I have a wide variety of lenses in the camera bag that I carry around with me all the time. I have a fixed focal length 50mm 1.4, a Tamron SP Macro 90mm 2.8, a Pentax 10-17 fisheye, and a Sigma 55 to 200 lens which is my second most used lens. I have a Canon 20D that I use in my studio.



The most exciting equipment that I have purchased lately is three sets of hot-shoe lights. I have three complete sets of lights, stands, umbrellas, soft boxes, gels and radio remotes. I also have hand held light extenders and other accessories. These lights will be my tools for creating my staged pictures in 2010.

Mark: If I could grant you any wish, answer this question: What would be your dream photographic project?

Mike: I assume you are speaking of a location. I would love to be sent on assignment to document the change in culture in Japan. The country is fast losing its heritage and is becoming more westernized daily. I would love to visit the country side outside Tokyo, then go into South East Asia on the Orient Express from Bangkok to Singapore. So if someone has about 20,000 U.S. dollar laying around and looking to give it away, I am packed and ready to go.

Mike Adkins resides in Huntington, West Virginia where he wears many hats including the 2010 President of the Ohio Valley Camera Club. Mike also sits on the board for the Tri-State Arts Association. You can find his photography blog at [Mike's Photography](#) and his articles and tutorials at [Mike Adkins Photography](#).

Mark Hamilton resides in Russell, Kentucky where he has been trying to figure out photography for some 30 years now. He has a glimmer of hope for 2010. You can find his photography blog at [4x6photo](#). He also occasionally writes for the [Ohio Valley Camera Club](#).