



Steffi Smith

Creates Memories, Creates Heirlooms

When Rabun photographer Steffi Smith of Cariad Photography aims her camera to capture a bride's most special moment, she knows up front that rarely will the lighting be perfect, the setting flawless or the character of the scene captured sufficiently. Yet when her clients receive their finished photographic memories, the light illuminates the bride's face perfectly. The slightly crooked floral centerpiece is straight and the architectural elements of the altar enhance without being obtrusive.

When Steffi was a fine artist, earning her livelihood with brush and canvas, it was

this attention to detail that endeared her customers to her work. When she put the brush aside and grabbed a camera instead, the same philosophy guided her hands, her eyes and her heart. From the word-of-mouth advertising she enjoys and the fact that brides will schedule their wedding date around Steffi's availability, it is a precept that has served her well.

"I'm a hopeless romantic," Steffi confesses. "When my brides look at their pictures 20 years later, I want them to immediately regain the feelings they had on their wedding day."

It's evident her clients believe they had more than just a photographer. Steffi is

their friend. Many brides ask Steffi to photograph their babies and share family news on a regular basis. Some have even come later to spend a weekend at Steffi's wooded Rabun County home.

It's been 21 years since she began getting mail in this northeast corner of the state. But it was quite a journey getting here. It was Volkswagen that brought Steffi here. Not the car, but the company. A native of Germany, her father was an executive with the German carmaker who was transferred to Brazil and later to the U.S.

Steffi and her late first husband were on a motorcycle trip and happened up on Rabun County where she was immediately smitten. They brought property and about eight years later, having done nothing with that land, bought a second parcel and began a house. It was the beginning of a new era and a new life for the artist who had built her career to the point where her works were fetching \$20,000.00 prices.

"I was burned out," she says of that time when she felt like she was drowning and had to force herself into the studio. "My

work was in five different galleries, but I had become a painting machine, producing what buyers wanted. Never mind what the inner me wanted to paint."

That's when she decided to give herself a two year sabbatical to do exactly what she wanted and to reassess her options and her future. She pulled all her paintings from four galleries and placed all of them in a location in Naples and never looked back.

Cameras had always been an artistic outlet for her, so it seemed natural to begin honing those skills, enhanced by computer software that would allow her to compensate for those less than ideal shooting conditions. "It was love at first sight," she says.

Thanks to technology, she was able to substitute a more beautiful sunset into beach-front wedding photos, making the bride happy. In one instance where a bride's eyelash came askew, she fixed it with technology. And when a wedding was staged in an art gallery, where the darkness didn't allow the artwork to display to maximum advantage, Steffi was able to compensate.

In her current career, Steffi vows it's so much more than just a job, because sharing in this most personal moment for a wedding couple allows her to connect in ways that would otherwise be impossible.

Whether it's a simple wedding in the great out of doors with just the couple and a minister or a large cathedral event - she has photographed weddings that cost more than \$750,000.00 - Steffi tries to give her clients little things not always included in the package that's been purchased. Those tokens of her romantic side can include slide shows of their photos or surprise uploads to their Facebook site.

Through November 2009, Steffi had shot more than 40 weddings. She usually does two or three destination weddings a year, which requires an entirely different method of organization and approach. Instead, she has begun to accept only those distant assignments where she can drive and arrive a day or so ahead. Regardless of where the assignment is, Steffi travels with backups for every camera and lens she has... just in case. "You only get one chance to capture those memories," she says.

Using the same skills and work ethic she used as a fine artist, Steffi captures nano-seconds of time and spends hours making them in to priceless memories and future heirlooms. This is why brides contract with Cariad Photography sometimes more a year in advance. This is also why they become life-long friends with Steffi Smith.

by John Shivers

