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Photographer celebrates 20 years in business

By JAMIE RANKIN



Joni Geary became interested in taking photos when she was just a teenager, and her passion for it has never waned.

Now, she is celebrating 20 years in business as the owner of Furnace Hill Photography.

“Whenever I was 15, I got a scholarship to the Touchstone Center for Crafts in Farmington for photography,” she said. “It was a weeklong camp, teaching you how to not only take pictures, but also how to develop them and how to print your own prints in the darkroom.”

Geary was the only teen attending the camp, which was full of adults. She explained a friend’s parent who was a jewelry maker at Touchstone referred her to the program.

“It was the best thing that ever happened to me,” she said, noting the immersive experience taught her a great deal about every aspect of photography. “From then on, you just couldn’t keep me out of it.”

Geary entered a photo she took while at the camp into an international contest sponsored by Kodak — and won.

With that acknowledgement of her talent pushing her forward, Geary began taking photography classes at Westmoreland County Community College at the age of 16. She went on to graduate from WCCC with a degree in photography, multimedia production and website design. She also worked in the darkroom there and obtained her first solid job opportunity.

“I was a field photographer for a construction equipment company. The day after graduation, I started traveling all across the country,” she said. “I had a hard hat and boots, and I had an atlas because there was no GPS.”

Geary went from job site to job site Monday through Friday. Within two years, she had risen to the position of marketing director. But while she enjoyed the corporate life, something wasn't quite right.

“I liked it, but it didn't suit me,” she said. “I wanted more, and there was no more than that. I wanted something of my own. I wanted it for myself, and I knew I could do it.”

So, in 2004, she opened Furnace Hill Photography on Furnace Hill in Dunbar.

“It was an old general store that I converted into a studio. I guess I thought I would be there forever,” she laughed.

After about five years, though, Geary moved the business to a studio on West Gibson Avenue in Connellsville, keeping the name.

“When I moved to Connellsville, the business had been established for so many years that I just went with it,” she said. “It was too late to change it then.

In those days, Geary shot mainly portrait-themed photography such as weddings and family photos. Her focus has since shifted.

“I have grown from photographing local families and special events privately to currently specializing in photographing the region’s schools, sports leagues and dance studios in high-volume photography,” she said.

Geary takes photos and produces yearbooks for schools in the Connellsville Area and Albert Gallatin school districts, as well as the Windber Area School District, where she is also the district’s sports photographer.

She travels to schools in Pittsburgh and Morgantown and recently photographed the Ice Miners hockey team in Connellsville.

Geary takes photos and produces dance books for Kids and Company in Connellsville and is scheduled to shoot the Alliance Volleyball League in Mt. Pleasant.

With most of her work coming in the form of contracts with schools and other organizations, Geary made the decision to give up her studio space and now works out of an office at her Connellsville home.

“That travel required me to give everything else up,” she said.

But it’s not a big sacrifice for Geary, who said she loves her job and is grateful to the parents who have supported her over the years by purchasing sports photos and yearbooks.

“I am thankful for the relationships I have gotten to build over the years with the area’s school districts, private schools, preschools and sports leagues,” she said.

When it comes to her favorite part of the job, Geary said a Larry David quote comes to mind: “When you look in the mirror, you see yourself as you see yourself. When you get a photograph taken, you see yourself as you are seen.”

“I see the best in people. That’s a big part of what I do and why I’m good at it,” Geary said.

Geary said she especially loves her interactions with kids and being able to put them at ease to get the best possible photo of them – one she wants them and their parents to like.

“I really do see the best in people, and I think that shines through,” she said.

