

Art teacher gets creative by starting photography business



Abigail Chopel Photography

Jess Kamens

World traveler comes home with wealth of experience using camera

By NICOLE SHELDON

Jess Kamens Photography may be a relatively new business in the United States, but it has seen the world.

Jess Kamens has loved photography since she was a child, but she began learning about the craft and honing her skills when she was teaching studio art at Minerva DeLand School in Fairport. She was inspired by one of her fellow art instructors, Paul Bergwall, who showed her the ins and outs of cameras and photography.

“Paul was a former employee of Kodak, and he explained the technical side of photography to me one afternoon in just 20 minutes,” recalls Kamens. “I was constantly watching how he pushed his students; they weren’t just taking a photograph—they were pushing themselves to be creative in a way that I really appreciated. He had a profound influence on his students.”

Kamens, 44, is a certified K-12 teacher and a graduate of both the College at Brockport and Nazareth College. The Penfield native attended the Harley School in her elementary years, Allendale Columbia School for middle school and then Penfield High School.

Kamens has a bachelor’s degree in interdisciplinary arts for children and a minor in studio art with a concentration in graphic design from Brockport. Her master’s degree from Nazareth is in art education. She taught for roughly a decade around Rochester, spending

most of her time at Minerva DeLand.

It was during her time as an art teacher that Kamens began exploring the world. She would spend time at music festivals in Ireland—a place she refers to as her “heart home”—during the summer months. Eventually, she decided to take a leave of absence for a year to study music in Ireland. That year ended up lasting eight.

From 2008 until 2016, Kamens spent pockets of time living in Ireland, New Zealand, Australia, Thailand, Slovakia and Berlin. Along the way Kamens photographed her adventures and realized that not only did she love photography, but that it could be a means to make a living. Kamens began her photography business, Jess Kamens Photography, abroad, but it was not until her return to the U.S. that she began pursuing it full time.

Kamens decided to return to Rochester in 2016 so that her young daughter could grow up near her grandparents. She focused full time on establishing her business and has an office at 919 S. Winton Road. But, she soon found herself working in a pattern that she was not comfortable with.

“I was burned out by working in a way that was high volume that didn’t allow me as much time and space for creative,” she explains. “With 10 back-to-back sessions on a Sunday, I didn’t have as much time to get to know my clients and give them exactly what they needed. I feel like what I was doing was very cookie-cutter. What I’m doing now is much more meaningful to me.”

Kamens—who runs the business solo—describes her photography business as full-service. She offers family portraiture, weddings and engagements

as well as commercial sessions for businesses that involve anything from head shots to photographs for rebranding.

For family and personal sessions, Kamens zooms in on the family’s vision. She meets with the family for a consultation to see what the family is like, what they are looking for and what types of images they want to look at for the rest of their lives. She also talks to them about what has and has not worked for them in previous photography sessions.

“The other reason for this consultation is to gain the trust of the adults,” says Kamens. “If I take a family out to a location and there are kids, I have them in the palm of my hand in two seconds. I have been working with kids my whole life. Parents are another story. Adults

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come with baggage and insecurities. When you have never met an adult and they’re suddenly in front of you with a camera, that’s too intimidating and it doesn’t work.”

Kamens does not time her sessions, and she is conscious of each family’s needs. If a baby needs to eat or a child needs to go home for a nap, she is flexible to regroup at a later time.

The goal for every client who walks

out of a session with Jess Kamens Photography is to leave with an heirloom or some sort of tangible artwork like an album that they can appreciate for the rest of their lives. Many photographers work solely in the digital realm—and Kamens did the same when she lived overseas, which made sense at the time since she was less established and more apt to move around—but she now emphasizes physical photos.

“We have pictures on our phones and on our computers, and I’d really like to know where they’re going to be in 60 years,” says Kamens. “We know exactly where tangible photographs and albums and pieces of artwork are going to be in 60 years. My grandparents, when they passed away, we went through boxes and boxes of the most beautiful photographs. But where is the cloud going to be in 60 years?”

Artwork is an integral piece of Kamens’ business. She takes full-service a step further and physically installs artwork in her clients’ homes, whether it is a large canvas above the fireplace or multiple framed photos to decorate a wall.

“The focus is on good, quality, printed work,” says Kamens. “The labs that I work with are top-notch. None of them are local, except for the woodworker. And the albums I make are really thick and high quality. It’s quite different than something you get off of Shutterfly.”

Most of Kamens clients are in Rochester, but she will travel anywhere for work. She is open to shooting destination weddings and will follow her clients wherever they want to go.

Kamens loves to scour new locations to shoot. She is fascinated by cityscapes, doorways, stairways and other special nooks. In fact, she never shoots in the same place twice. Kamens may shoot in Highland Park for different sessions, but she will find a new area of the park to use as a backdrop.

The other angle of Kamens’ photography business is set on companies.

“I help businesses extend their brand through photographs,” says Kamens. “The importance of imagery for your business is key, but I take it from an artistic vantage point. I don’t take a random picture of you working in your business. I create a work of art from that, so when people look at your website or social media they love it and it resonates with them.”

Through Jess Kamens Photography, Kamens introduced group workshops and private photography classes for both adults and children to the business in 2018. Though she has chased a career in photography, Kamens is a teacher at heart.

Kamens says that the two most challenging aspects of her business is marketing and reaching her clientele.

“As a creative, we didn’t take marketing classes or classes on how to run your business,” she says. “I’ve been studying marketing, business tactics and accounting for my business for the last two years.”

While reaching her targeted demographic is not always easy, when the right clients do find her it is a perfect match.

“My clients are amazing and they keep me going and energetic and creative,” says Kamens. “I just want to reach people who value their legacy.”

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