Big things can happen when you make a radicial life-focus adjustment. Here's how hard work, a little bit of luck and a lot of Internet savvy gave Jasmine Star the mega-boost her young business needed.

WEDDINGS

By Stephanie Boozer

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Star power

Meet Web wunderkind Jasmine Star and her Facebook fans

She has over 19,000 "likes" on her Facebook fan page. Viral buzz about her blog and website have spread across the Internet, and she's just getting started. Jasmine Star has become, well, a star, or as close as a wedding photographer can come. She's held her own in the saturated market of Orange County, Calif., for the last three years, no small feat for a new photographer. Star shot her first wedding in October 2006, but her story really begins in 2005, with law school, her own wedding and her ailing mother.

Star's mother was diagnosed with cancer during Star's junior year in college, but two years later was in remission. Following the path she felt she was supposed to take, Star went into the UCLA School of Law on a full academic scholarship—a dream come true, if you *want* to be a lawyer.

"I had worked my tail off to get there, but I just wasn't happy," says Star.

Fate stepped in. In that first year, Star's mother had a relapse. Star took a leave from school and moved back home to help out. She admits to having felt like she was in the midst of a "quarter-life crisis."

"I thought I'd go back to law school," she says. Star's medical leave wouldn't last forever, and her scholarship was there waiting. Still, she was wavering. That's when her long-time boyfriend (and now business partner), J.D., proposed.

"It was the best thing that could possibly have happened," says Star. "We planned a wedding in Hawaii in just six months, because we really wanted my mom to be there."

Star wanted to spend the bulk of their small wedding budget on photography. "I didn't care about the dress," says Star. "I'd always loved photography, and I used to develop my own film. But I never thought I could do it professionally."

She met Santa Barbara-based photographer David Jay, and was able to book him for her wedding. "It's such a huge part of my story, that my mom was able to walk me down the aisle and David Jay was our photographer," says Star. "I can't think of a better person to have captured that. There were tons of tears on that day, happy and sad, and I kept thinking, 'This guy has my dream job! He's here in Hawaii, documenting people when they're happy.'"

UCLA still needed Star's decision. "J.D. said something that has become the cornerstone of our business," she says. "'I would rather see you fail at something you love than succeed at something you hate.'"

That Christmas, Santa brought Star a Canon EOS-20D. She decided to give photography a year and see what happened. She learned everything she could from every available source. By year's end, she'd photographed three weddings solo. In 2007, her career exploded. She booked 38 weddings. While her images easily speak for themselves, what really gave this budding photographer a boost was her Web presence.

David Jay had just launched a company called Showit (showitfast.com), an online solution for photographers who want cool websites. "I heard somebody say that your website is your handshake and your blog is your voice," says Star. "I wanted to have a firm handshake and a well-defined voice."

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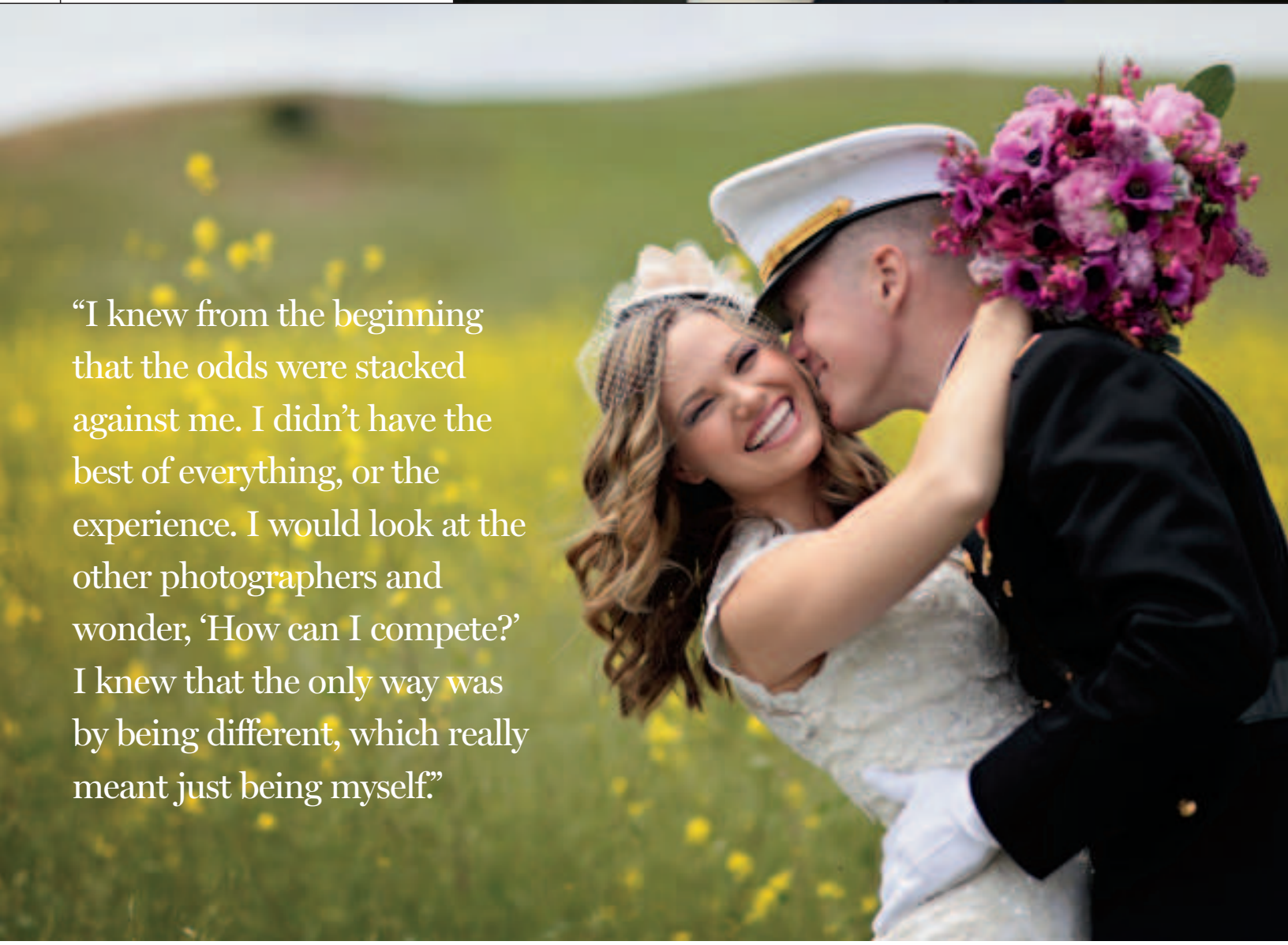
Jay helped Star design a website that would embody her brand and her style, and they backed it up with a blog that would not merely dazzle, but pull Star's clients into her world.

"I knew from the beginning that the odds were stacked against me," says Star. "I didn't have the best of everything, or the experience. I would look at the other photographers and wonder, 'How can I compete?' I knew that the only way was by being different, which really meant just being myself. Once I embraced that, everything was different."

Incorporating video with her website was



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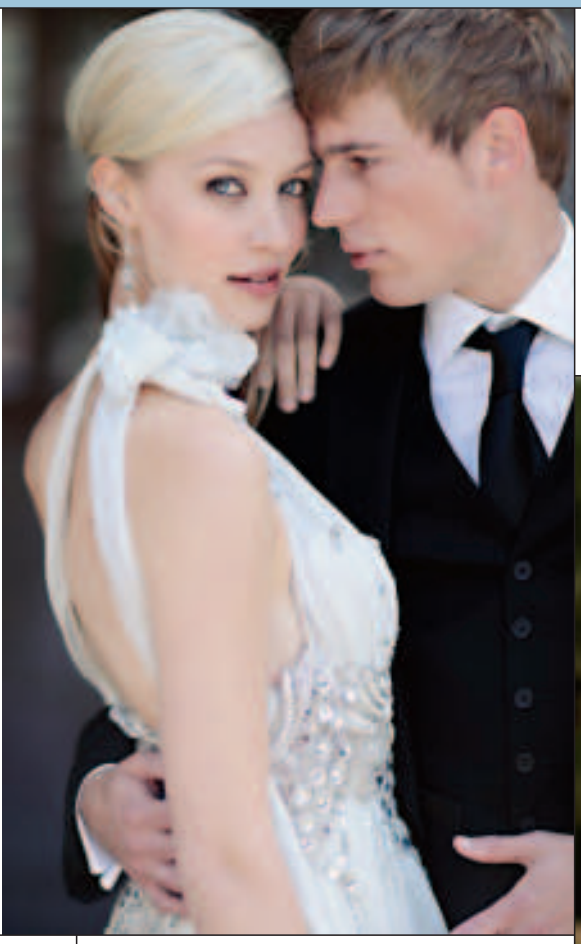

one of the biggest game changers for Star. A short video clip rather than a splash page greets visitors, setting a fashionable tone with trippy scratch beats and arty cuts. Other videos throughout the site give viewers behind-the-scenes sneak peeks of Star in action.

"It's so simple," says Star. "The best way to get clients to trust you is to talk to them, and the best way is online. It changes the relationship. People can see how I work, see the interaction between a client and me. The videos document me as a photographer and as a person. By the time viewers call me, I'm not a stranger. It was a huge benchmark for my business."

When she turned on her new website and blog, the growth was explosive. "I felt like I went from fifth gear to owning a Mazerati," says Star. "I had this small site that was literally thrown together and I was having trouble landing bigger weddings. I knew there was a big disconnect between my website and my brand. Once I had a site that matched my brand, it was huge and instantaneous. Editors started looking at my work, and wedding coordinators, and I started moving in the direction I wanted to go in." ■

See more of Jasmine Star online at jasmine-star.com and jasminestarblog.com. Stephanie Boozer is a freelance writer in Charleston, S.C. See what she's up to at stephanieboozer.com.