



A baby is sitting on a wooden floor, wearing a crocheted hat with blue and brown stripes and a long tassel. The baby is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is a solid teal color.

Dream reborn

How Cris & Deanna Duncan
rekindled a lost dream
of pro photography

BY JEFF KENT

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hen Cris Duncan, Cr.Photog., CPP, was 13 years old, he dug ditches one summer to earn money for his first photo enlarger. After building his own darkroom he'd go on dates with his high school sweetheart and future wife, Deanna, consisting of photo safaris followed by processing the captures in the darkroom. Photography was something Cris always felt he was meant to do.

Friends and family talked Cris out of majoring in photography in college in lieu of something more practical. He wanted to open a studio after he graduated, but he again conceded to their advice, and went to

work for several years at his father's electrical contracting company.

Meanwhile, Cris kept making portraits of friends and family, and even a few high-profile figures—President George H.W. Bush,

President George W. Bush, Vice President Richard Cheney and Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf—at local events.

Eventually, Cris decided he'd lived other people's dreams long enough. He and Deanna



had just begun to plan for opening a studio when Cris' dad tumbled from a 21-foot ladder, severely injuring himself. Cris stepped up to run the family business. "On that day I saw the dream in his eyes die," Deanna recalls. "He saw himself running his dad's company forever."

Cris never stopped shooting, booking appointments for nights and weekends and slowly building a client base. He attended seminars and joined photography organizations. Deanna supported him throughout, scheduling the sessions and building a business plan.

The turning point for the Duncans came at Imaging USA 2007 in San Antonio, when a freak ice storm hit the city mid-convention. As they weathered the storm in their hotel room, they pored over the information they'd

gathered in class. "That experience forced us to review everything we'd learned at the convention," says Cris. "We really thought about what we wanted from this business. By the time we got home, we had decided this was what we wanted to do—needed to do—as a full-time occupation and as a lifestyle."

Deanna quit her job to manage the fledgling business full time. His father now recovered, Cris set a date for his departure from the company. He worked mornings at the family business and afternoons with Deanna at their home-based studio.

The Duncans called on area wedding vendors, displayed work at bridal shows and craft fairs, participated in Junior League events, networked like crazy, created a Web presence, even called people they knew who

were getting married to see if they had a photographer. "To make this business work, we had to step out of our comfort zone and ask people, 'Will you take a chance on us?'" says Deanna. "In the process, we learned that although the images are important, what really sold us was our excitement about photographing weddings and families. That encouraged people to book us, even when they hadn't heard of us."

The Duncans also promoted the convenience of booking their services. If someone at an event expressed an interest in family portraits, they'd use mobile technology to book a session on the spot. Says Deanna, "If you make someone go home, get on the Internet, and navigate through a website, your booking rate goes way down. iPhones





and iPads have changed our world. We use applications like Book M [free from Miller's Professional Imaging] and SuccessWare to book and track clients on the fly."

The strategy quickly boosted the studio's profile, and gross revenues grew more than 700 percent in a couple of years. The Duncans moved the business from the tiny space in their home in a questionable part of

town—"the 'hood," Deanna calls it—to a 1,700-square-foot space off of the back of a much nicer property in an affluent neighborhood. The studio, C j Duncan Photography, now does a mix of child, family and senior portraits (about 50 percent of the business) and weddings and commercial work (about 25 percent each).

Stylistically, the studio's work leans toward

the classic look, but with a twist. Cris focuses on relationships. In session, he shoots both camera-aware photographs and narrative-style images for a storybook album. He gets a sense of which look the client prefers at the pre-session, which also helps him make product recommendations. Clients who prefer more traditional portraits tend toward large prints for the wall. The clients who prefer the multiple-image storytelling photos are likely to opt for a book or album.

"Over the years, my lighting, posing and technique have evolved, but even as the look of the images has changed, we've been able to please our clients by creating portraits that are specific to them," says Cris. "A lot of it boils down to knowing your clients and understanding the key dynamics of their relationships."

The Duncans believe strongly that their entire journey brought them to a place where they were prepared for success. "We believe everything happens in the proper time," says Deanna. "If we had tried to do this when we were 21, we would have failed. We would have lacked the confidence to charge what we needed to survive. We wouldn't have understood what it takes to make great family portraits. It wasn't until we had experienced that stage [starting a family] ourselves and learned about how to run a business that we could take on this challenge successfully."

"Without those experiences, even the difficult ones, we wouldn't be in the position we're in now," adds Cris. We could have focused on the challenges and reacted negatively, but we decided to create a way to make it happen. ■

To see more from Cris and Deanna Duncan, check out cjduncan.com.

