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Julie Michelle develops photo hobby into career

Kristin Luna, Special to The Chronicle

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Russell Yip / The Chronicle

Julie Michelle (left) and Claire Cochran look over some of the photos Michelle took of Cochran at Corona Heights Park.



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When Julie Michelle lost her job at an interior design firm in April, she decided to redesign her career. With a camera.

Everything clicked. Even though Michelle had no formal photography training - she didn't get her first camera until 2008 - she has launched "I Live Here: SF," a photography project in which she uses everyday San Franciscans as subjects.

"I figure if somebody comes across it and lives here and wants to be a part of it, all they have to do is ask," Michelle says.

She requests that each person find his or her "own San Francisco," whether a neighborhood, a walk or a place that captures a version of the city, and she sets up a time for the shoot.

"It really is all about (the subject)," Michelle says. "They write their story, they edit their photo set, they pick their location. ... That's all a part of their story."

In the six months since the project's conception, Michelle has photographed more than 50 subjects from all walks of life. And the project has opened doors that Michelle once thought unimaginable: She's landed portrait, wedding and concert photography gigs.

Before being laid off, Michelle, 42, viewed her photography as just a hobby.

When she wasn't working, Michelle was taking pictures of San Francisco, often in her favorite neighborhood, Chinatown, when the sunlight was just beginning to creep over the horizon in the early morning hours.

"When I was starting out, it didn't even occur to me to take pictures of people. I was so entranced by San Francisco that all I wanted to do was take pictures of everything around me. People didn't count," she said.

One gloomy day

"I Live Here: SF" didn't begin to take shape until Michelle wandered into Queen of Sheba, a Nob Hill Middle Eastern market, one particularly gloomy day earlier this year and struck up a conversation with the woman, Ghalyia, who was running the place.

After a while, Michelle asked whether she could photograph her; Ghalyia consented. Michelle posted the results on her blog (tangobaby2.blogspot.com) and wrote an accompanying story. Soon, she was overwhelmed by readers suggesting she do more of the same.

"That was when I thought this could be fun - meeting people in San Francisco and taking their pictures," she said. "When I was trying to come up with a concept, I realized I love being here so much, and everyone you meet - whether a native or transplant - is here for a reason. They feel very attached to this city, and I thought it would be great to let them use their own voice and write their own story and I'd take their picture."

So in March, she created "I Live Here: SF" and posted her progress at iliveheresf.blogspot.com.

Then she lost her job.

"At first, the two were unrelated: I had this hobby that I enjoyed and devoted some time to, then I was unemployed and figuring out what to do next," she said. "Finally, I thought I needed to fill my time somehow. You can't just sit at home all day and send out resumes; that gets depressing."

Attention to detail

Michelle once worked as a makeup artist and now attributes her ability to analyze a face to that detail-oriented profession. (She offers her pro-bono services to all "I Live Here: SF" subjects who want to be made up.)

"Being a makeup artist primed me to look at faces in a very objective way and summarize one very quickly. You learn to look at faces in a different fashion because you're constantly touching them, summing up, in a way - not good or bad, just objective - and I didn't realize until I started doing these shoots just how much that's helped my photography."

After the editing process, Michelle allows the subjects to choose which photos they like and which ones they want removed from their file. She gives the subjects the images on a CD, along with some prints - all for free.

"I never wanted money to be an issue with this project," she says. "If people are going to be generous with me and their time, their faces, their story and their passion, it's worth more than money."

Want to participate?

After the first anniversary of "I Live Here: SF" in March, Julie Michelle hopes to show the product in a local gallery space. Those interested in participating in "I Live Here: SF" can contact her at iliveheresf@gmail.com. Her Web site is www.femmefotographie.com.

Kristin Luna is a freelance writer who met Julie Michelle through stumbling upon the I Live Here: SF blog and participating in the project herself. E-mail comments to datebookletters@sfchronicle.com.

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