

JESSICA ZOLLMAN



LA-based photographer Jessica Zollman, aka Jayzombie, recalls her love of photography that started in childhood with her father's obsession over taking pictures. After her dad unexpectedly passed away, her path eventually led her full-circle back to her first love of shooting, with stops along the way, like studying music business and serving as Instagram's community manager and fifth employee. Here, Jessica opens up about how vulnerability plays into her creativity, the importance of self-care, and the challenges and rewards of turning her passion project into her full-time gig.

Tell me about where you grew up and how your childhood influenced your ideas about creativity?

I was born in Detroit, MI. My mom is Canadian and her side of the family is from Toronto. My dad grew up in a suburb outside of Chicago, so Detroit was in the middle between each set of grandparents. We lived in Detroit for three years and most of my memories are of my dad with a camera in front of his face. The photos from my childhood are of me and my mom—there are very few of me with my dad because my mom didn't know what to do with a camera.

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When I was four, we moved to California because my dad started a new business out there. Shortly after we moved, my dad was diagnosed with cancer and he passed away about three months later. The photos he took, and the photos of the two of us together, became super important to me. I remember obsessively looking through those photos over and over again—probably to recreate the timeline of a story I wasn't sure I would remember because I was so young when my dad passed.

After my dad passed away, I took a lot of pictures with those disposable Kodak film cameras. It was my way of making sure memories were still being captured. Those were my earliest memories of me being creative.

So you gravitated toward photography after your dad passed, but did you continue to embrace it as you grew older?

I'm going to get personal and give context about why I'm asking. My mom died when I was ten and experiencing that trauma early on led me to believe that I needed to be practical so I could support myself. There was a tug of war between the pragmatic, self-sufficient part of me and the side that wanted to risk and do something creative. Is that something you wrestled with? I definitely wrestled with that. My mom did an incredible job of encouraging me to try a million different things. Before she settled into her current career, she was a seamstress, then an elementary school teacher, then she worked in the restaurant industry, and when we moved to California she got into meeting planning.

“My college graduation gift was a camera. I couldn't tell you the model, but it wasn't fancy. It was an entry-level DSLR. I was obsessed ...”

When photography became a part of your life again, was it something you had considered making a living from?

Not at all. That wasn't until much later. At 17, I was still lost and confused. I didn't know who I was. Grew up in a town in the East Bay that's extremely white, mostly upper middle class, and very Republican. There was something strange and unnerving about it. I embraced a lot weirder things, but on the surface I still fit into my neighborhood. I stayed at home and went to junior college first so I could save money to live in a different city. Then I went to University of California, Santa Barbara. A couple of my friends went to Brooks Institute of Photography, but I majored in English. Again, I had no idea what I wanted to do. My emphasis was in theology, which meant I studied religious texts in addition to standard English courses.



Tell me about the timeline after college. You got involved in the tech world and were the fifth employee at Instagram. What led up to that role?

I moved back home after I graduated college and worked for my mom for a year. I got into a major car accident during that time, and I broke my nose in three places and deviated my septum. It was the best and worst timing ever. It was super traumatic and I had to get a septorhinoplasty. I really struggled with my identity after I was forced to have a nose job. I had a stronger nose before thanks to my extremely Jewish father, and I came out of it with a more cute and “normal” nose like my mom’s.

The struggle with identity and the pain that came with it had a big impact on my life. My face didn’t look like me and it made taking photos really hard—it turns out you put your camera to your nose a lot. I documented my healing process, got better, and moved to San Francisco. I took photos of friends’ bands and started classes at the University of San Francisco. They have night courses to earn a music and recording industry certification. I figured that if I was going to do anything photography-related in the music industry, then I should know the industry. I think it was the creative and practical sides at battle with each other again. I got my certification and then asked, now what? What does this mean? How is it important, and how will I make money?

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I will say that I was put into therapy after my dad died, and being so young, I did a lot of drawing. I was in therapy from ages four to six, and it was all based around creativity. As a kid, it’s hard to communicate your feelings, so creativity was the best tool to do that. For me, expressing my creativity is absolutely therapeutic because that’s how I was raised and how I processed everything that happened in my life.

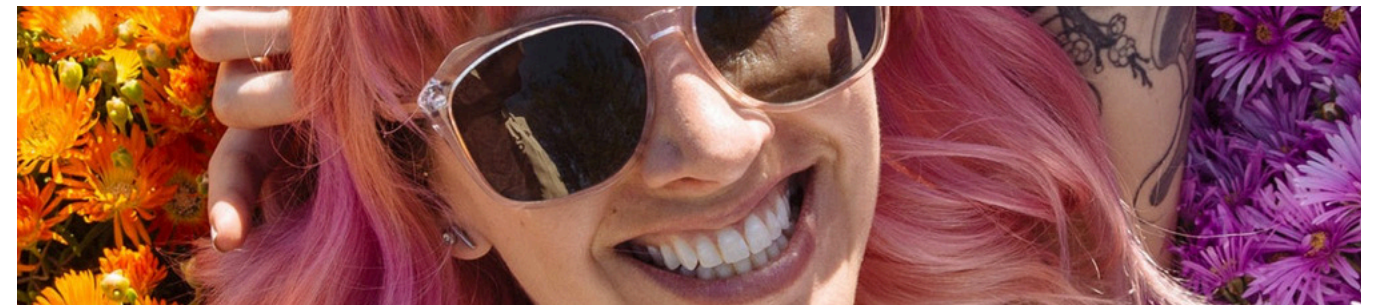
“I joke about this, but when people asked me what personal projects I was working on last year, I said me. I was my personal project. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

That’s what led to me being Instagram’s community manager. I really, really embraced photography at that point. That was the start of being the middleman between the community that loves taking photos, but maybe can’t afford a professional camera or just wants to share everyday moments from their lives. I had to not only be a tech person, but also be a full-blown community member. I had to dive in and be part of it.

You were at Instagram for a few years before you left to pursue photography full-time. Tell me about that process in your mind: was there an “Aha!” Moment, where you fearful or putting it off, or were you eager?

I really hated working at Facebook. I think that’s the place to start. I loved working at Instagram and I still love the community, but when we were acquired by Facebook, I was the most skeptical out of everyone on our 13-person team. I was the most resistant. I had no desire to take a bus to work. My dog had been our office dog for almost a year and I was so heartbroken to not have him around every day. It turns out that when you have anxiety and a little dog who loves you with all of his heart, you actually have an emotional support animal, and I didn’t realize that until later.

I also wasn’t sure that Facebook’s goals were my goals in terms of creativity. They told us that we made this magic and that our team must have done something right and they didn’t want to mess with it. But I wasn’t doing creative things. Every week I trained other teams to take over the side projects I had done when Instagram was a startup. I wasn’t focusing on creative things and I was losing my mojo. It became tiring and it was no longer fun.



I like that. I have one last question for you. What advice would you give to a young person starting out—or are there any insights you’ve had over the years?

The biggest thing I wanted to hear when I was younger is that if something you’re excited about doesn’t work out the way you expect, it’s okay to roll with it. Let life take you where it wants to. Obviously, having some control is important. This means that for me as a photographer, I’ll do something different if this stops paying the bills or being fulfilling. I won’t consider it a failure.

That’s the lesson my mom taught me and the thing I wish I could tell people when they feel disappointed that a creative endeavor didn’t work out. Try it, live in it, enjoy it when it’s happening, but if it doesn’t work out, that’s the way it’s supposed to be. Don’t beat yourself up over it. I did that a lot in the early days, even with jobs I didn’t really care about. I think part of that pressure comes from society and I wish it wasn’t that way.

I would also say that if you’re lucky enough for your passion to become your main career, try to have something else as a side passion. Putting all of your heart and emotions into the thing that fulfilled you before can make it unfulfilling really quickly. That’s something I’ve struggled with, and still struggle with.

I’ve tried to turn my focus on getting involved in my local community. For example, I did a project with the salad restaurant Sweetgreen. They have a local program to teach fourth and fifth graders about sustainable food and sustainable living. I volunteered to take photos for that because it’s an amazing project. I also volunteer as a photographer for the Los Angeles Fire Department’s events. Whatever your’e doing, if there’s a way to turn your passion into your career, then do it.