

Doing what you love: A career in photography

Nicole Bowman

Leah Williams upheld straight-A's in high school, carrying that trait into her studies at Virginia Tech, while also acquiring a new interest: photography.

“In high school, I was so worried about not knowing [career goals] and I stressed about it daily,” Williams said. “The stress only worsened as I began my freshman year of college.”

Snapping photos of brides-to-be and capturing a senior's final moments in high school, Williams is beginning to build an impressive portfolio.

Williams' passion is evident as she talks about the photography work she has already completed. Hearing the excitement in her voice and glancing at the frames lining her bedroom walls is enough to indicate photography's significance in her life.

However, Williams confesses that her pursuit of a photography career has been anything but ordinary. She enrolled at Virginia Tech as a university studies major and then switched to history during December of her freshman year. Since then, she has added a political science minor and a business minor.

“When I declared my major, I didn't know that I was into photography yet because I hadn't started it at all,” Williams said. “I declared history and found my passion for photography that spring.”

In relation to her political science minor, Williams says she has always enjoyed politics. In fact, she hopes to campaign in D.C. before starting a photography career. Her dream job combines her passion for politics and photography, although she admits that it is a long shot.

“I watch interviews with the official White House photographer all the time, and I think his job would be so cool,” Williams said. “That would be a perfect mix of the two things that I love.”

However, as Williams continues to talk about career goals, she always returns to local photography. Despite contemplating short-term occupations after college, including Teach for America, Williams says her ultimate goal is to save enough money to open her own photography business.

Williams’ experience in the last year proves that she is not hesitating to jump into the business. Starting with simple photos of her friends and family, Williams has already taken photos of brides, newborns, children, families and graduating seniors.

“I’ve found that every single time I do something for the first time, I’m really nervous beforehand and then it always turns out okay,” Williams said. “I just need to trust myself and realize that I’m going to be fine once I start taking photos.”

Williams emphasizes her enjoyment in photographing all subjects, but she has found that photographing children can be especially rewarding.

“Kids are probably my favorite to photograph, because you can capture such real emotions with them,” Williams said. “I usually just let the kids play and goof off while I take pictures. They don’t even realize I’m there—I feel like I can get much better pictures that way.”

In addition to photographing various subjects, Williams currently interns with a wedding photographer. Traveling to weddings around Virginia, she has learned that interning with a professional photographer can provide a unique learning experience.

“When working with a professional at a wedding, there is not a lot of time for him to explain what he is doing and show me the settings on his camera,” Williams said.

“Because of this, I’ll come straight home and be excited to research the techniques I saw him use at the wedding.”

Williams encourages other aspiring photographers to intern with a professional photographer to explore different types of photography. Although Williams would like to open a business to photograph various subjects, she admits she would enjoy shooting weddings occasionally as well.

Looking back on her academic indecision, Williams gives a special kind of advice to students experiencing similar situations: “let time unfold.”

“I realized that I needed to sit back and trust that eventually I would be shown what needed to happen and it would all work out—and it kind of has,” Williams said. “It’s all fallen into place now.”

Williams’ unique story emphasizes a noteworthy point for all college students—it’s not always necessary to have a foolproof plan or even a specific major. Doing what you love is what is most important—even if it means you are a history major, minoring in business and political science, with a passion for photography.

Lara Hopkins, a local child and family photographer, experienced similar indecisiveness in college. Hopkins began her schooling at Auburn University in art school and finished with a Bachelor of Science in wildlife science and a Master of Science in secondary science education. However, she admits that her background in arts benefits her work as a photographer.

“In order to be a good photographer, you have to be both a good artist and a good businessperson,” Hopkins said. “There are a lot of people good at one or the other and I think the ones that succeed are both. It’s not as common to find someone who has both of those skillsets to make a profitable photography business.”

However, Hopkins emphasizes that it takes more than just a good camera to be successful in the current job market.

“Right now, the market is somewhat flooded with people who think they can be a photographer and run a business—and it’s because of the technology,” Hopkins said.

“You can get a good camera for a reasonable price, but it’s not the machine that makes the photographer.”

According to the [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), there are an estimated 54,410 photographers currently employed in the U.S. Of this total, the majority of photographers—37,230—are employed by a long list of “[other professional, scientific and technical services](#).”

However, the opportunities for photographers don’t stop there. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics also reports “radio and television broadcasting” as the second most common occupation for photographers, employing 4,730 of the total 54,410 employed photographers in the U.S.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics also states that a total of 3,930 photographers in the U.S. are employed in the field of “newspaper, periodical, book and directory publishers.” The top-paying choice for photographers is “aerospace product and parts manufacturing,” employing only 50 out of the total 54,410 employed photographers in the U.S.

With so many options and the interminable need for professional photographers, it doesn't look like the profession is disappearing any time soon. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts a projected growth of 13 percent from 2010 to 2020 in the employment of photographers, a growth that is "about as fast as the average for all occupations."

In addition, several national organizations provide support for photographers. According to their website, the Professional Photographers of America offer membership benefits such as copyright protection and advocacy.

Virginia Tech also offers several options for photographers in both the [school of visual arts](#) and the department of communication. Those interested in an artistic outlook on photography may be interested in the visual communication design program in the school of visual arts. Photojournalism, offered by the department of communication, is also a noteworthy course for photographers interested in news material or broadcasting.

Pursuing a photography career can be discouraging, especially if it does not relate to a specific major. However, Williams' and Hopkins' stories prove that passion for the work and a drive to succeed are what truly matter.

"No matter what, work hard at what you choose to do," Williams said. "Don't be afraid to make mistakes—it will only help you improve and grow. "