

Vulnerability

A Father's Passing

The gallery director had just put the finishing touches on my exhibit. It was 5 o'clock and I didn't have much time to get back home, let the dogs out, and get ready for the 6 o'clock opening, my first show in Sarasota since my retrospective at the Ringling College of Art and Design in 1997.

I was literally out the door when the phone rang. Instead of ignoring it, I ran back and grabbed the phone, "Your father has had a heart attack, and we are at the hospital," said my mother.

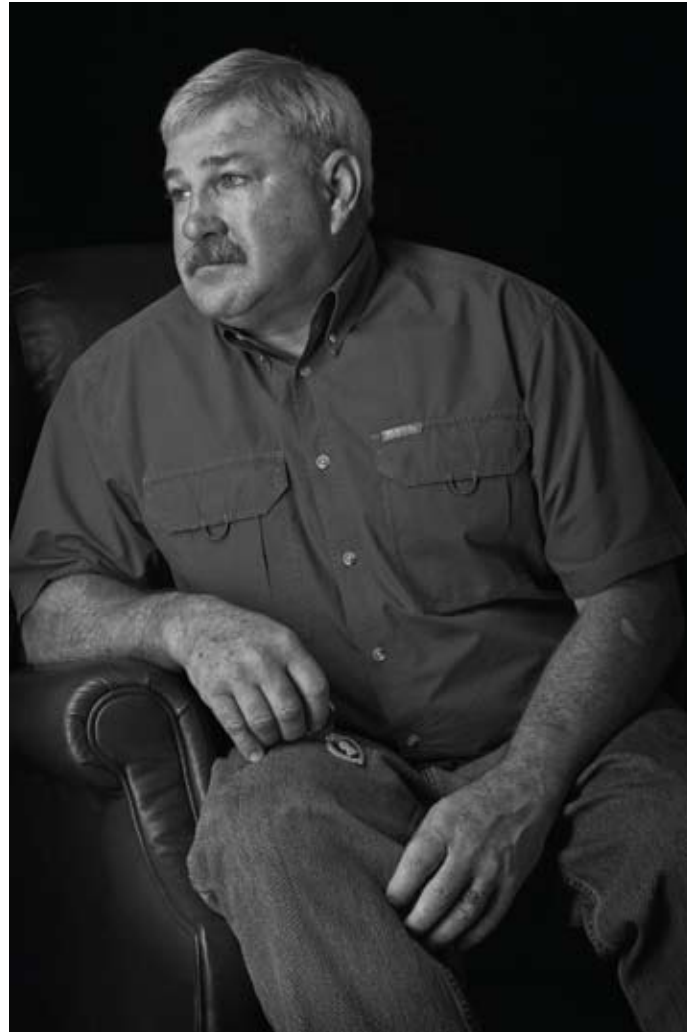
"When did it happen?" I asked, trying to force the slight panic down my throat.

"It happened this morning, and we didn't want to worry you, with your opening and all."

I could really care less about the opening with my father being ill, and I immediately left to get to his bedside. I called the gallery and had my wife briefly represent me in my absence until she and my son joined me at the hospital.

The news was not good, my father suffered from a massive tear in his upper aorta—a 50 percent chance of surviving. The doctor suggested that we make arrangements to call our loved ones to inform them of the prognosis. With the exception of my sister, everyone who had mattered was already in the room that night. My mother made the call.

I sat outside the door alone, cursing myself, crying and sobbing, because I had not taken the time to take a portrait of my father. If it weren't for my wife's snapshot of us at my father's 80th birthday I would not have had a recent portrait of my father



Of this photo of Gary Jackson, Katzman says, "I knew this would be an emotional sitting and tried to prepare myself the best way possible. When I first drove up to his home, I noticed a "Beware of Pit Bull" sign on a white post. I soon met Babe, who was more concerned about the strobes popping than my presence. With the portrait session under way, I asked Gary to stare out the window, and he began to cry (again). "What do you see Gary?" I asked. He replied, "I see thousands of crosses in Arlington Cemetery." Curious, I stopped shooting, and assumed the same vantage point, looking at a white post with its warning."

while he was still alive. There I was, asking, no, praying to God to please give me a second chance, please make my father well. How could I live with myself, knowing the only alternative was to take a post mortem portrait, something that I didn't want to nor intended to do.

The operation was a success. It only lasted two hours instead of five and the tear was in the lower aorta ventricle and

could be closed with medication. We all had been given a second chance.

As my father began to recover from the surgery, his weight loss allowed him to get into his wedding suit that he wore 57 years ago, and yes, his bride also fit in her wedding gown. That would be the portrait shot on 20x24 Polaroid camera I had access to. Everything would be set up by the time they got back from their second home in New York.

But it never happened. My father was misdiagnosed in Sarasota, and died in New York City, three months later. The night he died, I told him how much I loved him, how excited I was to do our project together. It was the last time I ever spoke to Dad.

And now I was forced to do something that I was regretting—to take one last look at my father before he was buried. With a borrowed Hasselblad and the help of a dear friend who was a photographer and former mortician, I spent the next two hours with my father. I was doing something that I loved with the man I so dearly loved. Even in his death, he gave me strength—not only then but now. It was the closure I needed to give his eulogy the following day.

I accepted the fact that I had lost the opportunity, and made the resolution that I would never allow myself to become conveniently distracted again.

A Soldier's Story

A year after my father's passing, Sarasota was burying a man named Kyle Jackson, the city's first fallen soldier of the second



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Iraq War. I knew that the press corps would be covering the event since a contingency from the Westboro Baptist Church, the religious hate group from Kansas, would be demonstrating outside of the funeral ceremony. But my sole purpose for shooting that day was to document the event so that I could deliver a series of images to the bereaved family.

I didn't make contact with the family, however, until over a year later, long after I'd archived the images. I was shooting the Memorial Day parade in part to capture promotional images for Sam Pardue, Co-CEO of Lensbaby, using his company's lenses.

I followed the parade route with my Canon EOS-1Ds Mark II with a Lensbaby attached until I reached the end and my eye was caught by three children, seated on the edge of the curb, waving American flags and wearing oversized, red sunglasses. Ordinarily I would have passed the scene, but I sat down next to the kids and started to focus on one child—blonde hair, red glasses, flag and a T-shirt that said... I couldn't read it. No one told me that I could take the camera down from my face.

Talk about an extension of one's self, but this is getting rather ridiculous. There I was struggling to read the writing on the proverbial wall, "My Hero." I almost had it. Now I'm dancing, my butt on the asphalt, head bobbing and weaving... I've got it! "My Hero, Kyle Jackson."

I pulled the camera off my face, my mind racing, questions still unanswered. And I looked at a young man sitting directly off my left shoulder. I stood up and began to tell him about a fallen Marine and a funeral I attended over a year ago. He corrected me, "He was in the Army and he was my brother, the man sitting over there is his father." Kyle was originally in the Marines and after being honorably discharged, he was able to fulfill a life long dream of flying helicopters by re-enlisting in the Army. He and his co-pilot were shot down while attempting to rescue injured soldiers (their motto, "Leave no man behind").

I told the brother how sorry I was for his loss, and turned to the father. "I was at your son's funeral, and I would like to give you a series of images that I took that day. They are very moving, I don't know if you are ready for them yet. It would also be an

Gary Jackson and family.

honor if I could take your portrait." As Mr. Jackson looked up, I could see a man visibly shaken by the day's events and he replied, "I am ready."

A year had passed since I had documented Kyle Jackson's funeral. I still remember the tears dripping onto my keyboard as I prepared the files for the first time, the event still fresh in my mind—observing the family's grief. I shared the photographs with Gary Jackson and the rest of the world, including his story, our portrait session together, and the importance of his son's death, "Freedom is never free." CC

Steven Katzman will be teaching a platform program on Wednesday Feb. 18 at the MGM Conference Center titled, "Developing a Personal Vision, While Negotiating the Interpretive Portrait." The program will be held in Rm. # 318 from 2:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m.

Steven Katzman, a self-taught photographer, established Steven Katzman Photography, LLC in 1990. His recent book is The Face of Forgiveness, Salvation and Redemption. Mr. Katzman has been on the faculty at the Ringling School of Art and Design since 2003. He is a Lexar Elite Photographer, a Gretag Influencer and is sponsored by Bogen Imaging. Visit his website: www.stevengkatzmanphotography.com