What does it take to impress a man who’s seen a million wedding photos?

BY JEFF KENT
ver the years I’ve probably looked at a million wedding photographs. Well, a few hundred thousand at least. I’ve also interviewed hundreds of wedding photographers.

This is simply the result of being an editor of a photography magazine. With that in mind, you can understand how I’ve developed a refined perspective when it comes to wedding photography.

That perspective went into practice last spring when, through much begging and bribery, I was able to convince my girlfriend, Kari, to marry me.

PUTTING IT TOGETHER

We decided on a medium-sized destination wedding in Breckenridge, Colo., a resort town about 90 minutes west of Denver. As Kari and I divided our tasks for the wedding preparation (and by “divide” I mean Kari told me what to do), the photography, for obvious reasons, fell into my court.

I launched an exhaustive talent search. Having interviewed hundreds of wedding photographers, picking the right one was a bit of an embarrassment of riches. In the end, I settled on the Denver-based Studio JK, run by Joe and Joyce Keum.

Joe and Joyce impressed us from the
beginning. In our first meeting, they sat us down, offered us tea, and showed us a series of slideshows and individual images. Their sense of excitement was palpable. When we left that meeting, I remember saying to Kari that photography was not only their job but their passion. That phrase can sound like a tired cliché, but in this case it was the absolute truth. From the perspective of a potential client, it’s an enormous positive. Yes, you want a wedding photographer who is professional and capable, but you also want someone who will share your enthusiasm for your big day.

Joe, the lead photographer at Studio JK, was our primary contact. I spoke with him routinely about updates to our plans, and we had a couple of planning meetings. Joe divides wedding jobs into three segments: the preparation, the event and post-production. He treats each as essential to the overall enterprise, which was comforting from my perspective. As a client, you don’t want a photographer who takes your money, disappears for a while, materializes at your wedding for a few hours, and disappears again.

**BEFORE THE VOWS**

Our wedding day happened to coincide with Breckenridge’s annual Oktoberfest. The historic Victorian mining town was covered in imported Bavarian kitsch. Luckily, we had rented a large chalet above the town and set up the backyard for the ceremony. For better or worse, there’d be no lederhosen or oompah bands at our wedding.

At 11 a.m., four-and-a-half hours before the ceremony, Joe and Joyce pulled up to the house. I was down at Oktoberfest with some friends, having a good luck, pre-wedding bratwurst and beer. Kari and her bridesmaids were at the house getting ready, so they had Joe and Joyce to themselves for a couple of hours before my crew arrived.

Joe feels this part of the day is crucial on a couple of fronts. The first is establishing a relationship with the key players. Joe and Joyce walked around getting to know all the bridesmaids, the family members on both sides, and the groomsmen, once they all arrived. And they didn’t overlook the children who were involved in the wedding. “Interacting with the kids is very important,” Joe points out. “You must get face time with them early in the day, because if they don’t like you, they won’t cooperate later.”

The second front is setting the scene. Joe and Joyce took wide-angle photographs of the house and the scenery. They zeroed in on
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the little details we’d obsessed over for months—Kari’s dress, the flowers, the architectural features of the house and the landscaping.

“You have to answer the question ‘where?’” explains Joe. “We want people who weren’t at the event to look at the images later and get a sense of the space, an understanding of where things were happening.”

Before moving on to the mandatory posed shots, Joe and Joyce concentrated on photojournalistic coverage of the day unfolding—the bridesmaids putting on makeup, the bride’s parents enjoying a laugh before the guests arrived, the groomsmen spearing themselves repeatedly as they tried to pin on their boutonnieres. (Joe was actually a great help in that area, as the guys and I were all thumbs—pierced, bloody thumbs.)

In addition to this coverage, Joe says a 5- or 10-minute pre-wedding portrait session with the bride is essential. “People love the photojournalistic shots, but they don’t necessarily purchase them,” he says. “However, if you work in a really good portrait, they always buy it.”

“The bride is the most beautiful right before the ceremony,” he says. “Up to that moment, everything is building. She’s emotional, anxious and glowing. A bride dreams of that first moment when the groom sees her. It’s a wonderful time full of anticipation.”

For Kari, the idea of this mini session was a little stressful. This is a woman who hates having her picture taken, much in contrast to yours truly (a.k.a. “The Ham”). Also, with the wedding just minutes away and our celebrant still missing in action, it was difficult for Kari to devote even a few seconds of her attention to being photographed. She was certainly emotional, anxious and glowing, the key word being “anxious.” Joe handled the situation smoothly. Kari and I had told him in advance about our preferences, predilections and personalities, so he knew that the bride needed to be approached with the utmost tact. Pulling her aside in his calm yet enthusiastic manner, he fired off a few quick shots and then let her go on her way. Some of these images are among my favorites from the entire day.

THE MAIN EVENT

As the ceremony was about to begin, Joe and Joyce took their places. Joyce usually positions herself up front to capture the congregation and the bride as she walks in. Joe moves around at the back of the gathering to photograph the overall scene and little moments happening away from the main stage. He carries two cameras, one with a wide-angle lens and one with a telephoto, and switches as needed.

During the ceremony, Joe likes to follow Ansel Adams’ concept of pre-visualization. He concedes that everything won’t happen exactly as you expect, but if you have an idea of what will occur and where, you can better position yourself to capture it.

“There are things that will happen,” says Joe. “There will be a kiss, an exchange of rings, an exchange of vows. Beyond that you want to tell the story through emotions and spontaneous little moments.”

I didn’t even know Joe and Joyce were there once the ceremony began. Of course, I wasn’t aware of a whole lot at that point. I didn’t even hear Kari’s sister scream halfway through the ceremony when a bee stung
AFTER “I DO”

The post-ceremony photo session is a difficult time for a wedding photographer. The bride and groom want a certain number of posed shots. They want images with their bridal party. They want different backgrounds and often different locations. But they also want to be enjoying their reception with their friends and family. Somewhere there has to be a compromise.

No one, and I mean no one, was going to whisk me away for pictures immediately after the ceremony. We were going to celebrate our new union by having a glass of champagne with said friends and family. So, working with Joe, we scheduled a 60-minute wedding party photo session after a post-ceremony cocktail hour.

Joe and Joyce approached this session with their action-oriented “life in motion” technique. “We do a photojournalistic portrait style,” says Joe. “Being active is the focus. The emotions that come out of an activity are always better than when people are just standing still. We start the couple with a little direction and then let them expand and improvise. We do not over-direct, because then everyone’s images start looking the same.”

Joe and Joyce had come up to Breckenridge a couple weeks before to scout out scenes for the wedding party session. Unfortunately, Oktoberfest now blocked access to many of these locations. As amusing as it may have been to have costume-clad, mustachioed brat peddlers reveling in the background of our photos, it wasn’t going to happen.

There were other problems—our wedding party included three pregnant women and three children under age 9. And the four groomsmen suffered separation anxiety over any prolonged absence from the open bar. We would be able to drag these people around for just so long.

Had it been up to Joe, our 60-minute photo session would have been 180 minutes. He was in the zone the whole time, hustling us from location to location and improvising ways to work around Oktoberfest. I later learned we did about a third of all the shots...
he had planned. This was the only time I felt the slightest tension between what the photographers wanted and what Kari and I preferred.

Luckily, Joyce did a great job keeping us on track, reminding Joe of how much time we had left and communicating with the shuttle driver about where to pick up all of us. It was comforting to realize that Joyce was keeping an eye on the clock while Joe concentrated on the final few images. It certainly spared us from any serious worry about missing the start of our own wedding dinner.

The shoot wrapped up perfectly. An hour proved to be just enough time to hit several locations, get some great photographs, and head to the reception before the groomsmen started to wander off in the direction of the nearest bar. I even overheard one of the guys saying, in a somewhat surprised tone, “That was fun!” The kids behaved wonderfully and the pregnant ladies kept any complaints about swollen ankles to themselves.

Because of the way we scheduled the day, we were barely missed by our guests. They had roughly one hour to make their way across town to the reception site for a sit-down dinner. With that break worked in, there was no awkward absence of the wedding party at the reception.

And honestly, I think we accomplished the perfect number of poses and locations. Joe and Joyce worked expertly around some unexpectedly bright conditions to produce a few truly impressive shots. The images turned out stellar.

**PARTY TIME!**

At the reception, Joe and Joyce again began with scene-setting images. When the dancing kicked up, they used a variety of techniques to capture the action. Joe prefers to mix additive flash with natural lighting. He inserts just enough flash to create better illumination, but not so much as to flatten the image or drown out the pleasing ambient light. “The
goal is for me to make it hard to tell what was shot with flash and what was purely natural light,” he says.

Joe occasionally faded to the rear of the room, working with a long lens and a remotely triggered flash. We loved the way some of these long-lens images turned out. They are tight, candid shots showing real emotions and real expressions, all of them properly framed and exposed. Meanwhile, Joyce would mix with the guests, capturing point-blank photojournalistic shots. Both photographers stayed until the very end of the reception, which was an unexpected bonus.

“There’s a traditional photographer’s list of must-have shots, and many photographers will leave when they’ve completed that list,” says Joe. “I don’t work like that. I want to be there. I want to capture those moments that aren’t on any list. Those are the images people end up treasuring, not the must-have shots.”

THE DENOUEMENT
About a month after the wedding, Kari and I back from our honeymoon, we went to Studio JK to review our wedding images. Joe and Joyce had prepared a slide show, which they presented along with champagne. I’ve written articles about presentations, but I didn’t know how I’d react to my own. Would it be cheesy?

As it turned out, we had a blast. Almost impossibly, Joe and Joyce were still excited about our wedding. They kept telling us how much fun they had, how much they enjoyed working with us. It was sincere. It was comforting. It was also flattering because I know they are busy photographers with a full schedule of events to cover.

We had already arranged to purchase our high-res images, so there was no pressure to buy additional shots. Joe explained his online ordering system, in case our friends or family wanted to order prints. We walked out with a gift, photo cards with an image of our wedding party. A week or two later, our digital images and a couple of surprise DVD slideshows showed up, housed in a nice leather mini album from Renaissance The Book.

The photographers I interview often talk about how they become friends with their clients, how the relationship with the couple transcends business. Now I get it. I went into the process with the critical eye of a photo magazine editor, and I came out of it with a much more emotional perspective. Yes, it was my wedding, but I was more impressed than I thought I’d be. To have that kind of impact on someone who’s looked at a million wedding photographs (or at least a few thousand), well, that takes talent.

For more on Joe and Joyce Keum and their Studio JK, visit www.studiojk.com.