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# Becoming A Wedding Photographer

How news photographer Sam Hurd stumbled upon his true calling

By Brian Matias >> Photography By Sam Hurd





In many cases, a wedding day is a practice in chaos. In some cases, it can take the form of organized chaos, while with others, well, not so much. However, there is no denying the symbolic beauty of this ceremonial event. Two people exchange vows to spend their lives together and, at that moment, begin an entirely new family. And there to chronicle all those moments—both the grand and the minute—is the wedding photographer.

These days there are a multitude of factors that hopeful budding photographers need to consider when deciding on wedding photography as their profession. The importance of identifying your style—as a photographer and business owner—will greatly determine how successful you may become. To get a deeper understanding of why someone would choose to

enter the field of professional photography, we spoke with Washington, D.C., wedding photographer Sam Hurd. His focus is on photographic techniques that are deceptively simple but have the potential to transform difficult or uninspiring shooting environments into one-of-a-kind opportunities, as his work demonstrates.

**DPP:** Let's start with your story. How did you become a professional photographer?

**Sam Hurd:** I started with photographing political events, press events, news conferences, stuff like that, in downtown D.C., working full time for the National Press Club. I was there full time for six, maybe seven, years.

**DPP:** How did you make the transition from National Press Club photographer to working for yourself as a wedding photographer?

**Hurd:** Back in 2010, I started by

shooting a coworker's wedding and then some friends of theirs. I pivoted into weddings full time about four years ago. I've been doing them for almost seven years total, because both the news stuff and wedding stuff overlapped for a while.

**DPP:** As a full-time wedding photographer, what does your year look like in terms of the number of events you photograph?

**Hurd:** In terms of my full-time bread and butter, I do about 40 to 50 a year, and I'm plenty busy with that. I still shoot press events on the side as they pop up, which tends to be a few days to a week before.

**DPP:** Given your lengthy background in this industry, at what point did you truly feel comfortable to consider yourself a full-time, professional photographer who makes a living off his work?

**Hurd:** It was right around year three, and it wasn't any one specific revelation other than I'd noticed that, financially, I was able to live completely off the revenue I was making from weddings, and all my salaried money I was making from shooting political events was going directly into savings. That was a big part, mentally, for me to feel like, "Okay, this is what I do. This is my main thing."

**DPP:** For others who may share a common interest in pursuing wedding photography professionally, it would help to know how you chose to transition from political events. Did you start as an assistant for another established wedding photographer?

**Hurd:** I was drawn to weddings immediately, from the very first one. I never studied under another photographer. I'd never second shot under anybody. At my first wedding, I was

the primary shooter, and I had a friend who was good at photography but never did a wedding shoot with me just to have someone with me as backup.

That first wedding was just amazing because I realized how much variety occurred at weddings compared to these press conferences where I was generally stuck in a box with a podium and one or two people standing there.

**DPP:** So let's say we have a photographer who has just shot their first wedding as lead photographer. They were happy and the client was happy. What's next? What advice would you give to that photographer as step two?

**Hurd:** As a bit of a controversial direction, in the early years, even if you're an experienced photographer shooting professionally in landscapes or some other portraiture, the big-

gest differentiator you have is your price point, and you should charge for what your experience allows for. I only charged \$500 for my first wedding, even though I was working as a salaried press photographer in D.C., because I had no idea what I was doing, and over time, I scaled up. And being aware of that while not making it a permanent situation is key.

**DPP:** Pricing certainly is a hot topic amongst photographers, in general. What else should a photographer consider while growing their business?

**Hurd:** Aside from pricing, getting people to see your work and pay more and more attention to it is key. I majored in computer science in college, so I've always had a real interest in the technical side, like equipment reviews and the newest, latest and greatest camera bodies and lenses. So I started early on doing gear reviews

that got picked up and shared on social media and other sites.

In fact, my first destination wedding that I ever booked was all the way in New Zealand, and that groom found me by reading one of my early camera reviews. That openness and sharing was just another way to start driving influence and interest over time.

**DPP:** What are your thoughts about budding wedding photographers who opt to shoot their first few weddings for free in exchange for gaining experience? Do you think that this practice has had a negative impact on, say, your ability to charge what you do for your services?

**Hurd:** I think that's a great idea, and I think that photographers who charge a lot of money for their weddings should never feel threatened by somebody that is shooting for free or for cheap. Maybe over the incredibly long arc of time, it does drive prices down a little, but if you're shooting at a starting price of \$5,000 for a wedding, I doubt you're being considered against somebody who's charging nothing. I don't know a client that says, "Well, we're thinking about spending \$4,000-\$5,000 on you, but there's also this other guy that's going to shoot it for free."

**DPP:** You had mentioned that since your first wedding, you've always been the primary shooter. What are your thoughts around being a second shooter for another wedding photographer, especially if you're new to the business?

**Hurd:** I'd say that as much as you can, it's important to consistently shoot actual weddings to get that experience, even if it's for free or for cheap. One thing that I've noticed, especially nowadays, is that the community of wedding photographers is much more open and receptive to new people and new ideas. Be persistent if there is somebody in your local market that is already established about working with them.





Stay on top of them because most established photographers already have their go-to list of people, but eventually they're going to have a time where you'll be needed. I promise that time will come, because there will always be scheduling and availability conflicts. And if you knock it out of the park—not only selfishly taking photos for your own portfolio, but being a real asset and providing wonderful images that the client will love—that's another great conduit.

**DPP:** Can you walk us through what your workflow looks like from the beginning through to delivery of the final photos?

**Hurd:** Sure. At least in terms of all contracts, paperwork, etc., it is all done digitally. I have no paperwork whatsoever for anybody. When I get the initial inquiry, before I ask for any details

about the wedding, I ask for the wedding date. Early on, I'd ask to share everything possible about the wedding, and it'd end up that I was already booked or generally unavailable. People would be pouring their hearts out, and it'd be completely for no reason. So now, immediately it's about the wedding date, and if I'm available, I immediately write back with a pricing guide that's on a mobile-responsive webpage.

**DPP:** Why do you feel that having a mobile-responsive webpage for your pricing guide is important?

**Hurd:** Because the way that most people will interact with you is on a mobile device, literally. All their wedding galleries, emails, everything is viewed on their mobile devices. I also send them links to a handful of galleries [to give] them a sense of the full set of images that they'll be getting. That usually acts

as a pretty good filter, which then leads to the next email, where I suggest we meet in person if possible.

There's nothing like meeting in person. You're dealing with a lot of different personality types at a wedding, so it's important people like me and I like them. I generally like everybody I meet with, but it's good to get that face-to-face contact. I go out of my way to try and meet everyone with zero expectations that they're going to book me because most clients that "come to the table" do end up booking me, and even for the 5 to 10 percent that don't, it's still worth my time to make the effort. I think that people really appreciate meeting in person.

**DPP:** Once availability and interest are confirmed, do you have any other interactions with the couple before their wedding day?

**Hurd:** Once they sign the online contract, if they have an engagement session, we'll schedule that. That's the only other time I'll meet them before their wedding date. A lot of my clients don't even have an engagement session, so the next time I'll meet them is on their actual wedding day. I do send an online questionnaire with some generic questions that apply to all weddings—address, start time, that sort of stuff—and then I show up on the wedding day and we just roll with it.

**DPP:** Do you ask for a schedule of events planned for the day to help you prepare?

**Hurd:** I am very relaxed and love the improvising part of the wedding day, so I don't ask for a schedule or a minute-by-minute account. All I need is the start time. I can figure it out from there, and it hasn't failed me yet, but I

know that it certainly doesn't work for all photographers.

**DPP:** What about scouting the location? Is there any sort of prep work that goes into your wedding shoot?

**Hurd:** No, I never scout if I can help it. I've been in situations where I've done rehearsal dinners and have seen the place, but it usually serves me poorly because no matter how hard you try, there are so many moving parts between the weather, lighting, etc. I'll get an idea in my head, and the circumstances would have almost certainly changed. So during that 5- to 10-minute window where I can give direction, my head is stuck on how it was the other day, and I'm less focused with what I have to work with at that time.

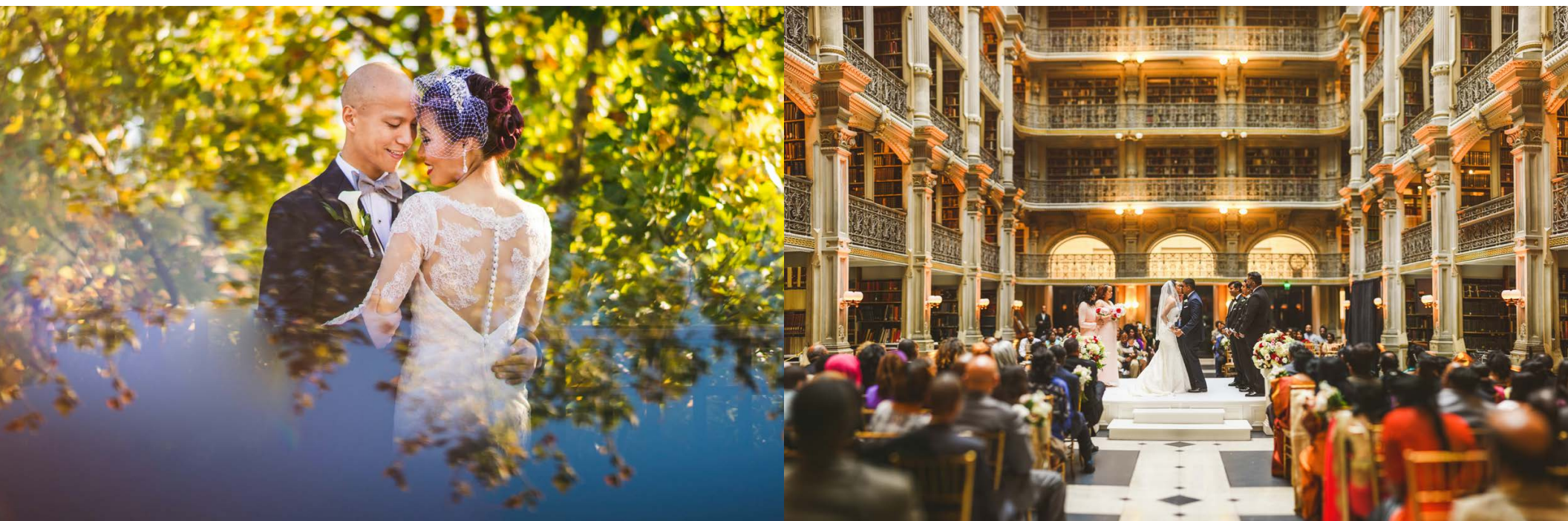
**DPP:** Are you more of a hands-on or hands-off type of wedding photographer? How much direction do you

tend to give to your couple?

**Hurd:** I generally have a very hands-off approach, and I don't direct people into anything unless I'm asked. I just work with what I'm given except for the portraits with the family, the couple and the bridal party. That does require some direction, but I try to limit the times that we do that. I try to wrap that up after the cocktail hour right after the ceremony because that helps to keep things smooth and quick. After the wedding day, the clients will get their photos within a month, and I will also slow drip some of my favorites after the first week.

**DPP:** Do you provide the full-resolution images or is there a pricing tier for what the client can get?

**Hurd:** I think some of that is carry-over from how things used to happen, especially from when photographers







were coming from film, prints and tangible results. As far as I'm concerned, a lot of that tiered pricing structure for what you deliver has gone by the wayside. While I don't deliver the RAW files, I do deliver the high-res, unwatermarked images so that people can do whatever they want with the images aside from re-editing them. The only thing I don't guarantee is the quality of the prints unless they're ordered from me, because I have no idea what printer the client is using, so I'm protective in that way.

**DPP:** How do you weigh the creative aspects of wedding photography as it relates to the in-camera composition versus post-processing/stylization?

**Hurd:** I can go on and on about this question. I've always had an aversion, speaking of presets specifically. I think they can be a great learning tool, especially as you unpack it

layer by layer to see how you get from A to Z. But for my own work, I've always felt that's the worst way to ever stand out. That's the whole beauty of shooting with digital. You have this whole layer that you have entire control over.

**DPP:** With all the files you have amassed from your years as a photographer, what are your on-location and backup storage solutions?

**Hurd:** To start, I am never in a situation where I don't have at least one copy. All my cameras have dual memory card slots—the Nikon D5 and D750—and have two 256 GB cards in each one. That's mostly because, very rarely, there have been times when I've started to shoot a wedding and realized that I hadn't formatted the cards. I never format a card unless I'm at my computer and can verify that every file has already been completely copied over. Once I'm done shooting the wedding, I take Card

No. 1, put it in a carrying case, and keep it on me until I get home.

Everything is imported into Adobe Lightroom, and I use the option to create a second copy on the fly. All the files go to a Pegasus R6 10 TB external RAID enclosure, and the backups are stored on a second identical Pegasus drive. Generally, I shoot about 70 GB of images per wedding, and I haven't found a practical cloud solution for that. So, during import, I also have Lightroom generate Smart Previews—which are much better than keeping JPEGs—that are backed up via Dropbox. That is a good enough backup in the intermediate three to four weeks that I have to deliver the pictures. So I'd say that I have 2.5 copies, if you include the Smart Previews. DPP

*See more of Sam Hurd's photography at [samhurdphotography.com](http://samhurdphotography.com) and follow him on Twitter and Instagram @iamthesam*

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