

PHOTOGRAPHY: a Collaborative Art

A Customer Profile
by Margaret Winchell Miller

Ask Brad Mariage what makes him a good photographer and you'll get anything but a straight answer. Just as every portrait is the corporate endeavor of many individuals, Mariage regards himself as a product of the parents, mentors, teachers and countless others who have instructed, influenced, inspired and encouraged him along the

way. A Houston portrait photographer who has been with Gittings/Skipworth since 1985, Brad considers his work a collaborative art in which his own talent, trained eye, and interpersonal skills are just one piece of the larger, more complex puzzle.

The reason he became a photographer is the same reason, he explains matter-of-factly, that he couldn't become a brain surgeon. "This is a God-given talent," he claims. "It's

what I was born to do." Snooping around his house at the age of eight, he stumbled upon an old Brownie camera belonging to his parents—and he hasn't stopped taking pictures since.

Brad's reflections on his life and career are punctuated with allusions to the Ohio church he grew up in—its parochial school, which he attended for many years; the catacombs underneath the choir loft where, in a makeshift darkroom with the help of a church member, he first learned to process and print black and white film; a team of singers from the congregation with whom he toured the country and through which he met his wife; and his fascination with the church's live radio broadcast which ultimately led him to Cedarville College where he would study Audio Engineering.

Two years later, however, he realized that radio broadcasting wasn't meant to be his life's work. Heeding the encouragement of friends and family, he enrolled at Elkins Institute in Dallas in 1983, where he completed a one-year program in photography.

Mariage credits his wife for urging him to call Gittings for an interview in 1985, and he credits a post-interview thank-you note inspired by

his brother-in-law for landing him the job.

But Heitzman, a member of Cameracraftsmen of America and an associate with Gittings Photography for more than thirty years, remembers looking beyond the note—and the work—to Brad himself.

The physical poses which photographers come to naturally are the ones they can encourage in others, Heitzman believes, and he always made a point of watching photographers during job interviews to see how they arranged themselves when they sat down.

"Brad loved to talk," Heitzman muses, recalling their initial meeting. I remember thinking, 'He's going to make a good photographer because he's so relaxed. He has such an easy way with people.' I knew I'd never have to worry about him being proper or polite."

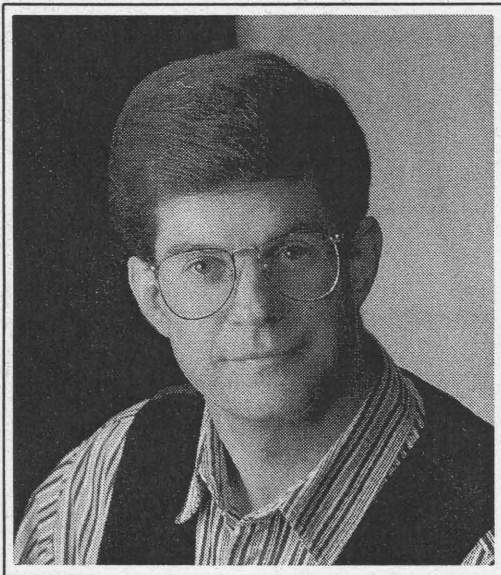
That wasn't always the case. "I didn't used to enjoy speaking in front of large groups," Brad admits. "I used to be a shy person. But when you're in front of a family of 23 and they're all from Taiwan..." He laughs, recalling the recent folly of just such a session. "You do what you have to do to get a good picture. This is a life for me now."

Mariage's personal life is another successful collaboration, along with his wife Gail and their two young boys, Blake and Drew. When he's not behind the camera, or lecturing in order to earn credits towards his Master's of Photography, they enjoy sailing and camping as a family. The combination of fatherhood and the great outdoors may have evoked Brad's distinctive style of children's photography using natural light, which, according to Heitzman, has become his trademark.

Working with Gittings has always been Brad's goal. It's the ideal job, he says, combining the prestige of a well-established business with the opportunity to use his rich imagination. Mariage praises Paul Skipworth, who, when he purchased the business from the Gittings family in 1987, brought a fresh, creative emphasis to the company and began encouraging each photographer to study people and portray families in their own environment rather than to work according to a formula.

When asked what he enjoys most about his job, Brad reflects only a moment before returning to the importance—and the reward—of customer satisfaction.

"Giving people what they want," he finally answers. "We've had people take beautiful works of art down from the walls of their home and put up one of our portraits, saying 'What better piece of art could I hang in my home but my two daughters?' When people say things like that..." A smile brightens his face. "... it helps me know that my work is important. I'm doing what I should be doing."



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