

**2005 Kodak Propass Magazine article featuring Judy Host**

Celebrity Confidential  
**How Judy Host Became the Private Photographer  
for the World's Most Public People**

**In This Article**

- [Shooting Locally](#)
- [Pacing Herself](#)
- [A Whole New Market](#)
- [Giving Back](#)
- [Artist's Biography](#)

When Judy Host shoots celebrity portraits, they don't end up on the cover of *People Magazine*. You won't see them in a spread in *Vogue*. In fact, chances are, you'll never see them at all. And that suits her perfectly. Because although Host's clients include public figures like Jack Nicholson, Pierce Brosnan, and Nicole Kidman, the portraits she shoots for them, their friends, and their families are for their eyes only.

Host began shooting private family portraits for the stars just two short years ago. Her entire photography career, in fact, is only 12 years old, despite the fact that she first discovered photography at age 15. "I took a photography class in high school and I fell in love, just totally head over heels," Host recalls. "For me, it was the very first thing ever in my life that I felt not only that I did well, but it was just the natural thing for me.

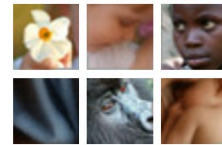
But for years, photography remained her hobby. Host spent 20 years with Bank of America and Citicorp as a senior product manager, traveling the country to install ATM software. That ended one morning in a hotel room when Host was 40 years old.

"I was traveling so much," she remembers. "You hear this a lot: You wake up and you look up at the ceiling in your hotel room and you can't remember what city you're in. That's exactly what happened to me. It scared me because I really could not remember."

Host knew that the only next step in her banking career was a move to New York. She decided to become a photographer instead. "I resigned and I came home and I told my husband what I wanted to do, and he looked at me like I was nuts," she remembers. "I had met some people, professional photographers. I saw what they were doing and I knew immediately it's what I wanted to do. I *had* to do this. I just knew it was the right thing to do."

**Shooting Locally [ [Back to top](#) ]**

Host began working from her home in Danville, 30 miles east of San Francisco, where her studio is still located. "I just joined trade associations and started shooting," she says. She began with portraits of children, though she says her specialty is broader than that. "What I always found myself loving to shoot was people. Not specifically children, but people," she says. "I always knew I was a portrait photographer. Landscapes are impossible for me, but if you give me a body to put

**Judy Host**

Click on image to enlarge.

into them, no problem."

How did she find the people? "Neighbors. Knocking on their doors. 'Can I photograph your children, please?' And I did it for trade; at first it was, 'If you let me have your child, I'll give you pictures in return.' Then, what I would ask them to do is refer me when people asked them about pictures."

Twelve years later, Host still works mainly through referrals. But her business background is evident in her marketing plan. She divides her work into three sections: The Family Collection, where she shoots family portraits and individual child portraits; the Baby Collection, which includes three photo sessions in one year "because babies change so fast;" and the Personal Collection, which includes model and actor portfolios and her latest interests, photographing musicians (she just completed two CD covers) and women over age 50.

### **Pacing Herself** [ [Back to top](#) ]

Host tries to limit herself to two shoots per day. "I have learned not to overbook myself. Five sessions a week would be perfect. Any more than that and my energy level as far as being creative gets a little tapped out.

"I usually photograph babies in my studio in the morning," she says. "Usually, my time with each client is about two hours. I may only photograph for 20 minutes, but I want to have the time to make sure the parents and the baby can relax and unwind before and during the session." She spends the middle of her day downloading and backing up her sessions. She also schedules sessions toward the end of the day to take advantage of soft outdoor light.

Host bemoans the fact that, because she runs her own business, she devotes just five percent of her time to what she loves best- shooting photos. She captures images with a KODAK PROFESSIONAL DCS Pro 14n Digital Camera, and prints her work through [Burrell Professional Labs](#). "I outsource everything that can be outsourced," she says. "The more time I spend with my clients and behind the camera, the better.

"When I started many years ago with digital, I got into the habit of backing up. I was already familiar with the technology side of it, but of course, that changes so quickly. It's trial and error. How many images will last on your card if you're shooting RAW files? How large can you go with them? I've got two portable hard drives. I don't keep anything on my laptop; everything is downloaded back, never touched again, and then I have my working file. Then I go through a process of color balancing, editing, art-working, putting photos into a slide show, so by the time that the client sees them, it's a finished product. I hate to show a client something that isn't already the way I want it to look."

Host has taught workshops for the past two years. Her latest, "Creating Your Own Style," includes how to create an environment that helps clients relax and enjoy their photo session. "Not only are we capturing a moment, we're creating a memory," she explains. "I want my clients to feel the emotional impact when they look at their portraits from the session. When a mother cries during the slide show, it's the greatest compliment I could imagine." She also teaches workshops on building a successful business with an emphasis on marketing and branding. "Most of my peers are searching for a way to define themselves in the marketplace," she says.

### **A Whole New Market** [ [Back to top](#) ]

Host has earned numerous awards shooting portraits "pretty much anywhere and everywhere. I don't use lights; I don't even own them. In my studio, it's all window lights. I can pretty much shoot anywhere under any circumstances unless it's pitch dark. I'm very portable. I can go anywhere and I do."

And now, she's being invited into the homes of celebrities. How she got there is another testament to her business savvy. Host was invited to contribute to the gift boxes that *InStyle* magazine and the Hollywood Foreign Press were giving to presenters at the 2003 Golden Globe Awards. The

presenter box, totaling \$26,270 in goods, included a \$7,000 spa package, a \$2,000 surfboard, and perfume worth \$1,250. "So I came up with this concept of a gift certificate for \$5,000. It was a huge leap of faith for me. I put the gift certificate into a beautiful box with 12 matted 4 x 5 photos of mine, just to give them an idea of my style."

Leap of faith? Maybe. Successful? Extremely. "I thought to myself, 'If I get one or two phone calls, I'll be happy.' Well, I got eight phone calls. I was shocked, so completely and totally shocked at the caliber of star that was calling me. And I'm thinking, 'Oh my God, oh my God.'"

Host's gift certificate only covered the cost of a sitting and a few prints. The stars were impressed enough by her work to ante up for much more. What followed was a portrait photographer's- and a fan's- dream.

"Jack Nicholson received a gift certificate; he gave it to his daughter who has two beautiful children. He wanted pictures of his grandchildren. And then Keely called me, Keely Shaye Smith, who is Pierce Brosnan's wife. She wanted me to photograph her two boys for him for Father's Day last year. We did that as a surprise. Nicole Kidman wanted pictures taken of her godchild as a gift for her best friend. Cate Blanchett gave hers to her agent as a gift."

It was then that Host discovered the secret to her success. "I am doing the same things with the celebrities that I was doing currently with my clientele," she says. "It's without the light and the white background and all the makeup. It's about who they are as people, not as actors and actresses. I always imagined there were plenty of photographers in Hollywood, but apparently not on a personal level. It was a whole new market."

She has since contributed to another Golden Globes presenter box, and was tapped as a photographer for the accompanying parties. She also created several images, including a close-up of deep pink orchids, as decorations for the 2004 dinner.

## Giving Back [ [Back to top](#) ]

Has Host gone Hollywood? Not by a long shot. In fact, conversation with her is dominated by a trip she took to document conditions in Rwanda and Uganda- and to photograph the presidents of both countries- for a newly formed nonprofit organization, the Project to End Poverty, whose goal is to establish a brand of products (Host compares it to the Newman's Own line) with profits channeled back into job opportunities and poverty relief. She got involved when founder Lawrence Koh saw an ad she had placed in *CA Image* four years earlier.

"I said, 'Sign me up,'" she remembers. "I donated the usage of my images, and the rest of the trip was covered for me. Primarily, I was taking pictures in Rwanda. We went into the orphanages to see how people lived. And that's heartbreaking. You're photographing men, women, and children that have no homes, no electricity, no running water, no roads, no families, and no place to live. Many are HIV-positive.

"It's awful," she continues. "You have women that have been raped, have had their families killed by their neighbor. And they are beyond devastation. They're living in mud huts with nothing. And they're such a physically beautiful people. They're very soft spoken, they're very genuine and gracious and so happy to see you. You represent hope when you talk to them; they just want you to listen. It was a terribly emotional trip."

She is clearly committed to the cause, and plans to travel with the group again as the project moves toward a goal of a 2006 television kickoff special. Host points out the contrasts and the similarities between her work in Africa and her work as a portrait photographer.

"It's funny," she says. "I'm shooting for *InStyle* magazine. I'm at the Golden Globes. I'm shooting all these celebrities all decked out to the nines. And then, two weeks later, I leave for Africa. When I'm teaching my workshops, I explain to my students how important it is to make sure your work gets seen- 'I put an ad together, and here's what happened.' It happened four years later, but if I had never put it out there, this would have never come to me."



As you might imagine, she describes her first 12 years as a photographer as wonderful. "I had a passion. I had a drive. I'm ambitious," she allows. "But photography isn't something that I do; being a photographer is who I am. This is why I'm here; this is why God put me on this earth. It's a gift that I have that I'm constantly giving away, and it just gets better.

"I love what I do. I would do it for no money. I love it that much. I always have a camera with me. I'm 24/7. It's disgusting."

Or, some might say, inspiring.

### Artist's Biography [ [Back to top](#) ]

In 2004, Judy Host was featured in *RangeFinder* magazine as one of "Today's Top Children's Photographers." Her work has been selected for national exhibition by the Professional Photographers of America, from whom she holds Masters and Craftsman degrees. She received KODAK Gallery Awards in 1999, 2000, and 2002, the latter for electronic imaging. Her images have been exhibited at Epcot Center and as part of a traveling loan collection. Host was selected by the Hollywood Foreign Press to include a portrait session in the presenter gift box for the Golden Globes in 2004 and 2005. She has photographed for Jack Nicholson, Pierce Brosnan, Nicole Kidman, and many others. She is also the first photographer to document a private Golden Globes viewing dinner hosted by *InStyle* and Warner Brothers. She also created images that were featured as part of the event's decor. She is currently working on a journal for *InStyle* on the events leading up to the Golden Globes, to be published next year. In January 2005, Host was hired by the nonprofit organization The Project to End Poverty to document conditions in Rwanda and Uganda and to photograph the respective presidents. She will travel to Ghana and Kenya for meetings with the presidents of those countries, and also to Cape Town, South Africa. She addressed the Professional Photographers of California/Western States Convention in 2005 and will travel to Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada in 2006 to present to the Professional Photographers of Canada. View more of her work at [www.judyhost.com](http://www.judyhost.com).