



# HEART & SOUL

PJ Heller meets Frauke John – a photographer who has developed a special rapport with her subjects



Gary and Marty

As a nurse, Frauke John has that certain *savoir faire* to make patients comfortable, whether she's caring for the elderly, working with the severely disabled or helping someone cope with a life-threatening illness.

Her medical training has also allowed her to see first-hand how many people, especially those with physical disabilities, have been marginalised by society.

As a photographer, Frauke is striving to give those people a voice through her imagery. By utilising the same people skills with her photographic subjects as she does with her medical patients, she can go beyond the typical portrait to bring out what is special and unique about the people in front of her lens.

Although she has photographed a wide variety of subject matter since turning professional in 2003, she has most recently been turning her attention to people with special needs.

"I think my passion now is people," says Frauke, who is based in South Brighton near Christchurch. "I especially like to work with people with physical disabilities."



With my people photos, I always like to show relationships and portray emotion



#### BEYOND THE BIG PICTURE

Frauke originally honed her photographic skills shooting landscapes. Her approach was not to focus on the big picture, but rather on the small things.

"People who start out in landscape photography try to include as much as possible," she explains.

"I think if you move in really close, that's where the interesting stuff is. With my landscape photos, I want to show what I'm able to see and what others don't notice," she says.

"I guess I see beauty in things that people just walk past."

Frauke takes a similar approach when shooting people, striving to go beyond the big picture to bring out something exceptional.

One of her favourite photos exemplifies this approach. The image is of two men in their forties, Gary and Marty (see above), who have Down's Syndrome and have lived together since they were young. Frauke says that in the image both men appear delighted to show they really care about each other and are truly best friends.

"With my people photos, I always like to show relationships and portray emotion," she says.



**Alex and Mum**

### **MAKING THE RIGHT CONNECTION**

The empathy that Frauke has with her photographic subjects, especially those with disabilities, stems in large part from her training and work as a nurse, both in her native Germany and now in her adopted home of New Zealand.

“I’m not shy about talking about disabilities,” she says. “I used to take my people skills for granted, but I now realise that not everybody has those skills. I look at other photographers who take beautiful photos but if they can’t connect with their subject, it shows. It shows right away.”

The response that Frauke got for images she took for the IHC (the New Zealand organisation that provides services to people with intellectual disabilities) helped convince her that she is on the right road with her photography.

“I wasn’t that confident [about the photos],” she confesses. “They [IHC officials] loved them and said it really shows that you care about these people and that they like you. I have that expectation with my photos.”

### **MEANT TO BE**

Besides nursing, which she still practices, the 36-year-old has followed a widely divergent career path while exploring a variety of interests. Her work has included stints as an au pair in the United States, as a window washer and as bicycle tour guide in New Zealand.

She has travelled widely, touring the United States, backpacking

throughout Australia and bicycling through New Zealand.

It was while she was working in Detroit as an au pair in 1989 that she developed an interest in photography. After the children she cared for accidentally broke her point-and-shoot camera, the family gave Frauke a single-lens reflex manual camera, which prompted her to take some photography classes. The teacher of these classes turned out to be a student of Ansel Adams.

“I had never heard of Ansel Adams,” she recalls.

### **LOST IN TRANSLATION**

Frauke never had any interest in photography while growing up on a farm in Germany. Her parents would take the requisite family photos as best they could. “My mom chopped the heads off everyone every time she got the camera out,” she says with a laugh.

This meant that learning photography while in the US was no easy task.

“I didn’t understand the technical part, the vocabulary,” she says. “I couldn’t translate aperture into German and when I did translate it I still didn’t understand what it meant. The instructor went on about aperture and shutter speed and it took me a long time to understand it.”

Complicating the learning process was the manual camera, which Frauke had difficulty adjusting. She eventually replaced it with a Minolta Maxxum 9000 that offered both manual and automatic controls. She admits it was a long time before she felt comfortable enough to take the camera off automatic and start shooting manually.



Four-year-old Grace Moreton

### WELL TRAVELLED

Most of the photos Frauke took during her six to seven weeks of travelling around the US were landscapes. That experience whetted her appetite for more travel – and more picture taking.

So, after spending three years back in Hamburg, Germany, studying nursing, she and a friend departed in 1993 for three months in Australia and three months in New Zealand. She carried the Minolta in her backpack in Australia and in her bicycle's handlebar bag while cycling New Zealand.

At the time, she still hadn't considered photography as a career. Her desire was to work as a nurse in Geneva, Switzerland, while her ultimate goal was to learn French, work for the World Health Organisation and travel worldwide for the agency.

However, instead of Geneva, she wound up in a large hospital in Munich for two years. Another adventure to Australia and New Zealand – this time solo for four months in each country – followed in 1996 before she returned once again to Germany. In November 1997, she came back to Christchurch to gain more nursing experience and eventually was granted permanent residency.

### ROLE REVERSAL

Her career plans shifted when she began taking a night course in photography at Papanui High School. It was here that her work won five awards from the North Shore Photography Salon. Encouraged by

her instructor, Tony Bridge, to study photography full-time, she went on to earn a Certificate of Professional Photography in 2002 from Photo Access, a private photographic school in Christchurch. It was about this time that she decided to remain permanently in New Zealand.

Her plan was to combine two of her interests into a career: working as a bicycle tour guide during the summer and as a photographer during the winter. However, she soon scrapped that idea after realising that launching a career as a photographer would require more time and effort. Frauke also knew that she needed to develop the business skills to set up a photo business, skills that were a complete reversal from her training as a nurse.

"It's a completely different relationship," she explains. "I do a little bit for the patients and they depend on me. Now it's the other way around. I depend on my clients."

### SAY I DO

By 2003, Frauke felt confident enough to begin promoting herself as a professional photographer via her website ([www.fraukejohn.co.nz](http://www.fraukejohn.co.nz)) and through networking and word of mouth. She concentrated on photographing families and children and wasn't interested in shooting cars, sports teams, or weddings.

"I really did not want to do weddings because I didn't believe in marriage and didn't want to be part of that," she says.

However, her attitude did a complete about face after she fell in love



Sarah Gallagher and John Grahams

(she and her partner are planning a December wedding).

"I met my partner and I realised that marriage was a beautiful thing," she says. "Then, after I'd photographed a few weddings, I felt absolutely honoured to be a part of the day. It's fantastic."

"So now I love doing weddings," she says. "It can be quite stressful, but I still get a kick out of it."

#### A PEOPLE PERSON

Just as with her eclectic background, her photography today covers a wide spectrum. While landscapes and nature have fallen to the wayside – it's difficult if not impossible to make a living shooting those subjects, she says – Frauke now aims her camera at people. Included in the mix are family portraits, weddings, children, pregnancies and what she feels may be her true calling: photographing the disabled and those outside the mainstream of society.

Among groups that she would like to photograph are the elderly (possibly on behalf of some non-profit agencies), the gay community including their civil unions and participants in events such as the Paralympics.

"I'd like to see more publicity for the Paralympics," she says. "It occurs shortly after the regular Olympics, but the media has already left and gone home and is not sent back. I think that's appalling."

Frauke also points to the people she has cared for as a nurse who she feels could benefit from her photography.



I love doing weddings. It can be quite stressful, but I still get a kick out of it



"I worked at Burwood Hospital, which has a unit for people with spinal injuries," she says. "I'd really like to give those people a voice."

#### KEEP IT SIMPLE

Frauke now shoots with a Canon 20D camera equipped with either a Sigma 18-28mm, 28-70mm or 70-210mm lens.

She doesn't have any lighting equipment, but will rent a colleague's studio in Christchurch if the need arises. However, her preference is to shoot with available light.

She says limited equipment and lack of lighting gear isn't a problem for her clients, especially wedding couples.

"What really sells my weddings is me," she explains. "There are lots of photographers who take good images, but I tend to click with people." Clients also like her approach, which is both spontaneous and reflects her sense of humour.

Having searched for someone to take pictures at her own wedding, she now knows from a client's perspective the importance of a photographer being able to work well with a customer.

"I'm getting married later this year, so I know it's crucial to have somebody you like," she says.

#### DIGITALLY CHALLENGED

Despite her adventuresome spirit, Frauke first balked at going digital.

"When I started photography I was determined never to go digital,"



Rachael Houston's wedding dress

she says. "No way." However, she reluctantly made the transition in early 2004 with a Canon 300D.

"I didn't want to unpack it," she recalls. "I kept it in the box for four weeks. I didn't really know what to do with it and had to take beginner classes on how to cope with the new technology."

A self-confessed computer illiterate, she not only had to learn basic computer skills to run her business, such as word-processing, but also get up to speed on Photoshop.

"I felt like I was starting all over again (with photography)," she says, adding, "I'm still getting my head around Photoshop."

In fact, it was only recently and at the urging of a fellow photographer that she began shooting RAW files rather than JPEGs. Now she wonders what took her so long to give RAW a try.

"It just makes such a difference," she says, pointing to the ease of editing and enhancing images.

She has even gone back to shooting landscapes digitally with the knowledge that she can produce images in Photoshop with the contrast and punchy colours that she saw when shooting Kodak Ektachrome E100VS film.

"I've got the confidence now that I can handle it in Photoshop and make something amazing out of it," she says.

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