

I graduated in 2005, and I'm not going to lie to you, coming back to my alma mater after 12 years is definitely a little weird.

After all, the last time I was in this building, I was walking across the gym floor in my cap and gown with a piece of paper that essentially said - this phase of your life is over. What are you going to do next?

I remember rushing into the cafeteria after graduation to take photos with my friends (not selfies, of course, because back in those days we used disposable cameras or giant digital cameras that were 3 or 4 megapixels at best). Looking back on those images now, it's funny how you can see it in all of our faces - the joy of finally making it through high school, the anticipation of the next chapter of our lives, but also the uncertainty of what would happen next. Photographs have the power to capture all that.

In high school, I knew who I was. I was the girl who was *never* without my camera. The girl who conned my friends into dressing up so I could use them as my subjects. The girl who spent all her study halls and even some lunches in the darkroom. Once I discovered my passion for photography, there was no turning back.

I immersed myself in it - I took every photography class I could, then completed an independent study of fashion photography. The darkroom at BHS felt like my home. What would it feel like as a little fish in the gigantic pond of Kent State University? Who would I be then?

The answer was simple, but not obvious to me at the time. I was, am, and will always be, an artist. The same is true for each and every one of you.

The one thing I did know for sure was that learning the basics here in the art department of Boardman High School — learning about shutter speed and aperture and ISO and light and composition — gave me the skills I needed to succeed, and provided a rock-solid foundation for me to continue to hone my craft.

My experience here also taught me to make mistakes, because sometimes, those mistakes turn out to be happy accidents instead. I remember one day in the darkroom, my teacher Mr. Fecik spotted an 8x10 I had just processed. It was blurry to the point where the subjects - little girls in school uniforms - were unrecognizable. I was disappointed, but he held up the image for everyone to see - i was horrified. To my surprise, Mr. Fecik simply said: **This is art**. He saw my photograph for what it was, not what it was supposed to be. I called this photograph Pirouettes, as it looked like dancers spinning in motion.

That photograph would be the capstone of my portfolio that went on to win a Gold Key from the Scholastic Art Awards during my senior year.

When the time came for college, I dove in headfirst at Kent State. I majored in photojournalism and spent the next four years immersed in photography. I shot constantly - for myself, for classes, and for the student media

publications. It was my first exposure to the real world of photography, knowing that my images would be published - gracing the pages of The Burr Magazine or the Daily Kent Stater newspaper, and would be seen by thousands of people. Working for the Daily Kent Stater was one of the greatest experiences of my life. I started as a photo stringer freshman year and by senior year, worked my way up to Photo Editor. It pushed me beyond my limits and out of my comfort zone, and I got to experience so many different types of photography - everything from sports to still lifes.

Find a way to do that for yourself. Experiment with your craft. Do you work primarily in oils? Try charcoal. Do you love shooting portraits? Try shooting a basketball game. You won't know what kind of photographer you really are, or what kind of artist you are, until you try something new.

Always find new ways to push yourself out of your comfort zone. As the great photographer (and my personal hero) Robert Capa once said, "If your photographs aren't good enough, you're not close enough."

Today, I am the proud owner of my own photography business, Cusano Photography. I have owned my business for 12 years. My focus today is primarily wedding and engagement photography. I shot my first wedding in the summer of 2005 and have shot more than 100 weddings since - and I love every single one. Photographing weddings is an incredible way to make a living - you get to be creative and connect with couples during the happiest time of their lives. Plus, knowing your photos will hang on their

walls for generations to come is pretty cool, too. If you're a photographer - try it - trust me. Second shoot with a professional whose work you admire. One of my other favorite things to shoot is production photos. I have been contracted with Youngstown State University for the past 6 years to take photos of their plays and musicals, and it's one of the most fun things I get to do. There are so many ways to make a career out of your art if you just know where to look. Often when a couple gets married, children come soon after. If you really connect with that couple, reach out to them for family photos - you could end up with lifelong clients. Or, students in the plays at YSU often need professional headshots for auditions. Even though I'm not a journalist, my degree in photojournalism helps me every single day, no matter what kind of photography I'm doing. The combination of technical knowledge from my degree and real life experience enables me to adapt to different situations and subjects, and makes me a more well-rounded artist and person. Take every shoot you can. Don't limit yourself and the opportunities will come.

That combination also gave me the confidence to push through even one of my darkest moments, when I considered giving it all up.

I was a junior in college, and the world of digital photojournalism was quickly evolving from still photos to multimedia — audio and video. Video was a whole new world to me — talk about being out of your comfort zone. I thought to myself that if this is where photography was heading, I wanted no part of it.

Around this time, I took an assignment to cover the First Spiritualist Church of Kent for the Burr Magazine. Spiritualism is the belief that the spirits of the dead have both the ability and the inclination to communicate with the living - so, essentially, talking to dead people. I was intrigued, to say the least.

this is a true story! On the day of the assignment, the writer and I headed to the church - which was really just a tiny house - on the outskirts of Kent. As the “service” began, I tried to stay as invisible as possible - something you’ll learn how to do if any of you become photojournalists - although it was difficult in the tiny room.

The spirit medium in charge had been “reaching” various parishioners throughout the service, speaking to them directly and sending them messages from their deceased loved ones that all was well in the afterlife.

About 3/4 through the service, the medium pointed at me - I was crouched in a corner at the time - and said, “may I reach you?” I was startled, not only because she had broken my concentration, but because as journalists we were taught to report the news and not ‘be’ the news - in other words, be an observer only and not a participant.

I immediately declined, but she persisted. I was skeptical of the whole thing, but especially so since at that time all of my grandparents were still

living and I had never lost anyone close to me. Who would want to talk to **me** from the other side?

The medium looked at me and said, “There’s a man here in uniform for you. His name is Robert. And he wants to tell you to keep taking pictures. He knows you struggle sometimes, but wants you to remember that this is what you love and what you’re supposed to do.”

At first, I shrugged it off. I was clearly there taking photographs - it would have been obvious for her to give me advice about photography.

The service ended and I headed back to the newsroom to process my photos. It was only then that my heart began to race, because as I was digging through my bag, I came across my copy of “Slightly Out of Focus,” the memoir I was reading by... my personal hero and one of the greatest wartime/adventure photographers who ever lived..... **Robert** Capa. Was it just a coincidence?

He did die in battle, after all, which would explain the uniform. And she could have picked any name in the entire world - but she picked Robert.

SO! I choose to believe that I basically got a pep talk from my personal hero. from the grave. no big deal.

I’ll leave you with this.

Being an artist is really hard. You will have those same fears and dark days that I had. Maybe you won't get some reassurance from the ghost of Vincent Van Gogh or Ansel Adams. But in those moments, whenever you feel that uncertainty and self-doubt: take a deep breath and remember why you do what you do. Remember the smell of dektol on your hands. Remember the sound of your paintbrush gliding across the canvas. Remember the feeling of clay beneath your fingernails. For me, it's the feeling of bringing my images to life with my own two hands — knowing that I captured a moment in time. That's nothing short of pure magic.

Remember those moments. Remember how much joy your art brings, to you and others. Throughout the course of your life and career, you'll ask yourself a thousand times, "What if I'm not good enough?" Rise above it. Know that you **are** good enough. And don't give up. Be honest with yourself and stay true to your passion - it will be with you for the rest of your lives - I promise. Even when it's hard to see, it will always be there. Follow your path, take every opportunity that comes your way, and never stop developing your vision.

If all else fails, head on over to the First Spiritualist Church of Kent and see if you can get some encouragement from the ghost of one of the greatest photographers who ever lived.