

With a clientele already established, Stephanie Clark officially opened her business in 2002 in her garage. Now clients travel many miles to be photographed at her gracious studio in the historic Mayo Mansion.

PORTRAITURE

By Jeff Kent

All images ©Stephanie Clark



It's not exactly fair to say that Stephanie Clark had been your average, camera-wielding soccer mom. True, she was a mom before she was a pro photographer, and over the course of a few years she eased her way into the field by way of photographing her kids. Clark had always had the heart of a professional photographer; it just took motherhood and digital imaging to make that heart beat loud enough to go pro.

Clark got interested in photography while studying graphic design at Marshall University in West Virginia. Enamored after a course in black-and-white film photography, she set up a darkroom on the third story of her house. Clark married and settled down in her hometown, Ashland, Ky., a town of about 25,000 near the tri-state intersection of Ohio, West Virginia and Kentucky. For a half-dozen years, she focused on her two children, now 6 and 11. But there was always a camera tucked in the kids' diaper bag to capture childhood moments.

Clark bought a digital point-and-shoot camera shortly after the birth of her second child. Before long she was obsessed with the instant gratification that comes with digital photography. "Deep down, I'm really just a big computer geek!" laughs Clark. "I was like a sponge, absorbing everything I could about the digital world."

Clark set up a studio in her house, just to photograph her kids. She bought a studio starter kit and upgraded the point-and-shoot to an Olympus DSLR. She started photographing her friends' kids, then her friends' friends' kids. Before long, she was spending all of her time

# The manor born

Stephanie Clark's talent and drive catapult her photography career

shooting and image editing on the computer. In 2002, Clark got a business license, set up a new studio in the house's detached garage, and made portraits a couple of days a week.

As is often the case with talented people, business just found its way to Clark. By 2004, the business was outgrowing the confines of Clark's garage. Then opportunity knocked. In Ashland, there's a historic site called the Mayo Mansion. Built in 1917, the 17,000-square foot house is listed on the National Historic Register. The owner wanted to unload the property and retire in the Caribbean. The mansion was appraised at more than \$7 million, but knowing the small community wasn't a prime market for a multi-million dollar property, he donated it to the local hospital, King's Daughters Medical Center. But the hospital didn't have the means to maintain the house and pay the property taxes. Clark and her husband were able to purchase the site for a fraction of its appraised value.

Suddenly, Clark was in the big leagues. The family set up housekeeping on the second floor of the mansion and created a studio on the ground level. "When we moved into the mansion, it was clear that photography wasn't just a hobby anymore," says Clark. "It couldn't be—I've got some big bills to pay now! Not only has my workflow changed, but this has become a real business. I work full-time—much more than full-time, actually. I have taken on staff. We market the studio and invest in it like any business. All that responsibility takes away some of the romance of the photography, but I truly enjoy the work, and it's been rewarding to see the business grow so quickly."

Clark has two full-time employees and a third contractor who works off site. She does portraits of mothers-to-be, babies, children, families, seniors and relationships. Though she offers both location and studio sessions,



most clients prefer to do sittings at the mansion or on its grounds. Clients come from all over the tri-state area for Clark's uncluttered style and images that focus on faces.

Three years after the move, Clark's business continues to grow. The key has been word-of-mouth marketing and consistent branding. "Word-of-mouth promotion has picked up even more since I've been in the mansion," she says. "The word has actually spread to a larger radius. Now, I'm getting clients traveling from a few hours away."

Clark has always been a strong proponent of tying her brand and her logo to everything she produces. "I have a very strong commitment to my brand," she explains. "I put my logo on everything...to provide clients with the full experience from my studio. That can be very effective if you're consistent—consistency is absolutely critical. It drives me crazy to see photographers who change their logo once a month. Decide on something and stick with it!"

Such convictions have also made Clark a popular speaker among professional photographers. She's presented seminars and workshops at PPA-affiliated conferences in Kentucky, Iowa, Minnesota, Michigan, Kansas, Tennessee and Texas. "I love speaking and teaching," she says. "It is so gratifying to be in front of a group of photographers who are excited about what you're doing. When you start bouncing ideas off each other, it can be exhilarating."

These days Clark's greatest challenge is balancing the demands of a burgeoning career and fulfilling her role as a wife and mother. But that's a happy challenge for Clark, and she faces it with enthusiasm. "Who would have thought we'd be living in this mansion and that I'd be spending all this time working in photography?" she asks. "There's no turning back now!" ■

*To see more by Stephanie Clark, visit [www.stephanieclark.com](http://www.stephanieclark.com).*

