

Q & A

Gavin Blue

With a strong desire to help others, Gavin Blue, through his work with Heartfelt, shows that literally anything is possible. *Capture* got a special insight into this very special work.

Armed with over 23 years of professional experience shooting across advertising, editorial and corporate clients, portrait specialists Gavin Blue turned his attention to a very different pursuit after a tragic event changed his outlook on life forever. With clients that include Qantas, Australia Post, National Australia Bank, Telstra, Suzuki, Volvo and Mercedes Benz, Blue has honed his exceptional skills to create life-changing and truly memorable photographs for ordinary people.

A former president of the ACMP for five years, Blue founded Heartfelt, a volunteer organisation dedicated to providing the gift of photography to families who may have experienced a stillbirth or premature birth, or those with a child who is terminally ill or in neonatal intensive care. His work as the president of the organisation has seen it flourish and help numerous families in the most difficult of times. Besides this, he has also helped to enlist the services of dozens of professional photographers around the country also willing to give their time and skill to help make the worst possible situation any parent can ever be faced with just a little bit more bearable.

Capture: What made you decide to become a photographer?

Gavin Blue: I have always loved photography and working with people. I can remember playing around with my parents' camera when I was little, creating setup shots of action figures and my guinea pigs. When I was a kid, I would wait patiently by my guinea pig's cage for ages until the light came across the cage in just the right position for the photo I had in my mind.

When I was older, I went to a private school that only offered photography as a one-term subject in Year Seven. In Year Ten, I worked on my parents for over four months until they finally allowed me to leave the private school and go to a state school that had a great photography course.

Capture: How did you discover your style of portrait photography?

Gavin Blue: I love portrait photography because I love people, and I love showing what I see in them. In 1998, after shooting an especially difficult studio session, I packed the car with all my gear and headed into the countryside to the town of Kyneton. I was working on a personal project where I was shooting people in their various professions. It was there that I created one of my favourite series of portrait images. The



MAIN: Timothy.



portraits were of people set up with the tools of their trade, such as large tractors and heavy machinery, with interesting landscapes behind them. It was then that I decided to stop trying to shoot studio, that I didn't enjoy, and only work on what I enjoy most - shooting people on location.

Capture: How are you able to capture portraits that represent the personalities of your subjects so clearly?

Gavin Blue: I like to make it very easy for people. I chat to them. Sometimes I say stupid things to get a reaction and just get them a little bit off-guard so that they're relaxed and natural. I shoot over a thousand portraits each year, so I use creative reaction to decide what would be best for the photo.

Capture: What has been one of your favourite campaign shoots?

Gavin Blue: One of the fun ones was doing the photos for the new FH Volvo truck launch that was released in 2013. I took photos in numerous scenarios involving the Sydney Harbour Bridge and various remote locations involving Australian imagery.

Capture: Is there a link between your style of shooting for commissioned assignments and what you shoot for Heartfelt?

Gavin Blue: The main link between shooting commercial assignments and Heartfelt is that Heartfelt gives me a healthy perspective on my commercial work. I feel very lucky to be able to work in this industry and I work very hard to deliver quality work that I am proud of. And I always aim to exceed the expectations of my clients. With the background of Heartfelt, I find I rarely get stressed by whatever comes up in shoots and I am able to keep drama out of the equation.

Capture: What are the central aims of Heartfelt, and how many people are involved with the organisation?

Gavin Blue: The aim is to give the gift of photographic memories, to help families who have experienced the loss of a child. These images help with grieving and provide the parents with portraits that they can share, acknowledging their child. Right now, we are currently looking after 80-100 families per month.

We currently have over 200 member photographers and retouchers who are professionals and have the skill and heart for Heartfelt's work. The organisation provides training through lighting demonstrations and in early 2014 will have online tutorials to further support members including session walk-throughs, how to use lighting in the medical environment and guidelines for the types of shots to capture. Member feedback is that the training and guidance is invaluable.

Capture: How have your past experiences influenced your work with Heartfelt?

Gavin Blue: My wife and I faced a parent's worst nightmare when our second child, Alexandra, was stillborn. We were lucky as we had a little time to plan and have beautiful images and a video of our time with her. The hospital photographer came and also took some photos. These were forensic and confronting and added to our trauma when they arrived a few weeks later. While at counselling, I came across some families that only had a single Polaroid, and some had no visual memory of their child at all. I saw this as an area where I could make a difference and so I founded the organisation that was to become Heartfelt.

Capture: What was your first experience photographing for Heartfelt?

Gavin Blue: My first experience was in a home, in the far outer suburbs of Melbourne. I was shooting for a family whose three year old daughter had a terminal illness. The drive to and from that shoot gave me a lot of thinking time; what was it going to be like, would it be upsetting, and would I do a good job? The family was really lovely, they were beautiful people. I remember the mum having to keep stopping the shoot to suction fluid that if left, could cause her daughter to drown. I left that shoot deeply moved by the parents' love and a profound sense of privilege for being with the family. I am always deeply touched by these situations and also honoured by the privilege to give this gift to a family. I feel it honours my daughter to be able to do this.

Capture: Is there a particular moment that has stood out for you during your work for Heartfelt?

Gavin Blue: A 16 year old boy was on the verge of passing away and could barely lift his head and arms. He was resting with an oxygen mask, leaning forward on the hospital table across his bed, completely wrapped

up in his parents' arms. Through breathless words I could tell he wanted to give his parents one last family photo. He caught my eye, counted me in with a count to three on his exhausted fingers, sat up and removed his oxygen mask and gave the most beautiful smile with his loving parents.

Capture: As a photographer, what is the most important part in taking these photos?

Gavin Blue: There are two important parts. First, giving the families images that they can treasure and share. This can go a long way to helping the grieving process. And second, when taking the photos, I start by accepting the situation and try to match the family's tone and be of service. When a family's world is falling apart, having a total stranger come in, sometimes in the middle of the night, and do this for free, can create a ray of light that all is not lost in the world.

Capture: Other than Australia, does Heartfelt operate anywhere else in the world and are there plans to expand?

Gavin Blue: Not yet. We get many enquiries and have recently added a page to our website about starting Heartfelt in other locations. We will expand to wherever a group of committed photographers wants to start.

Capture: How does pro bono work help you professionally and personally?

Gavin Blue: It gives me a healthy perspective on my work and I think any sort of pro bono work is good for the soul.

Capture: How can other professional photographers get involved, and what sort of photographers are best suited to shooting for Heartfelt?

Gavin Blue: We are always looking for photographers with the heart and skill for this work. Most of our members have had some experience of loss, whether it be personal or someone close to them, and are skilled with controlled lighting in tight and difficult circumstances. New members can find all the relevant information of the website. □

LEFT: Maddie.

ABOVE: Lola.

RIGHT: Lola.

CONTACT

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