

Photographer wants portraits to bring hope
By DEREK CATRON, Staff writer



Daytona State College photography student J.D. Rouse uses portraits to help boost people's self-esteem. (Photo | Tre' Trainor)



J.D. Rouse's photo of Stephanie McColley to celebrate her friend's "coming out" after losing 60 pounds.



J.D. Rouse's photo of Tyson Robertson tying a boy's shoes in preparation for a family portrait as part of Operation: Community Capture in cooperation with the Salvation Army.

DAYTONA BEACH -- The girl was unusually quiet; her chief means of communicating seemed to be the scrawls and doodles that adorned the notebook she held tightly against her.

Photographer J.D. Rouse trusted her instincts. The troubled teen's assignment had been to come up with an idea of how best to express in a portrait what was inside the girl -- and that meant the notebook.

With a little Photoshop magic, Rouse got the look the girl was going for: a black-and-white image of her face, with the purple notebook jumping off the print in full color.

More than two years later, Rouse recalls the girl's reaction when she saw the photo.

"That's it, that's it!" the girl shouted.

"I can't put that into words (how it made me feel)," Rouse said, her brown eyes widening like the aperture of a lens. "She had this vision of who she was going to be and what she wanted to see about herself. And ... it worked. She sees herself differently now. Not just another person in this world that nothing's going right for."

The feeling that girl found in front of the camera is the very same one Rouse finds behind it, and it lies at the heart of an effort led by the 28-year-old Daytona State College photography student to boost people's self-esteem through portraiture.

Rouse calls it Operation: Community Capture. The three-year-old program is now working with Stewart-Marchman-Act Behavioral Healthcare's Project WARM (Women Assisting Recovering Mothers), which provides a safe place for pregnant women and those with young children to begin their recovery from addiction.

Rouse's plan is for her and fellow volunteer photographers to provide family portraits for the women going through the program. They're working with Women of Diverse Endeavours, an Oak Hill-based nonprofit that supports women's issues, to cover expenses for the Dec. 11 photo shoot.

The portraits may represent a valedictory sense of accomplishment for the clients -- as well as a reminder of what's really important and incentive to stay on track, said Deborah Zeoli, president of the Stewart-Marchman-Act Foundation.

"It's a long-term recovery, a lifelong process," Zeoli said. "A picture lasts a lifetime."

Zeoli said she has high hopes after meeting with Rouse following a tour of the WARM facility the photographer had taken.

"One look in her eyes and I knew it was a good fit. I knew that she got it," Zeoli said. "She has impressed me. She has that caring, get-it-done attitude."

Rouse said her knack in working with down-on-their-luck subjects comes naturally.

"They don't feel any judgment from me," she said. "I accept you for exactly who you are and exactly where you are. Because I've been there. I know what it's like to be judged, a lot of times for things you have no control over."

Rouse moved to the Daytona Beach area from Baltimore with her mother and twin younger brothers when she was a high school senior.

Their mother took them out of their home and school because she was afraid of the influence the neighborhood was having on them. But after the promise of a job in Florida fell through, the family was living in a van, sleeping at an interstate rest stop before driving to Seabreeze High School every morning.

"You couldn't tell we were homeless. We had all our clothes," Rouse recalled. "We'd wash up every morning at the rest area. I'd still do make-up. You just put on a tough face and you go to school."

Coming from a poor inner-city neighborhood, it was mind-blowing to see all the new cars while walking through the student parking lot.

"You're just like, 'These kids have it all!' Like you're in shock. And you're like, 'I'm not going to eat today because my mom needs to save the money.' "

Life got better for Rouse and her family, but she had those lessons in mind when a Daytona State College professor told her class about a project in Miami to encourage adoptions by shooting portraits of foster children.

That motivated Rouse and some friends to start their own effort. They've worked on a few projects since then, including one with the Salvation Army to provide portraits for families trying to get back on their feet and another to help teens build more self-esteem.

For the Project WARM shoot, Rouse is helping to hustle up the funds to provide each of about 20 mothers with framed photos and a CD with extra images as part of a gift basket intended to help the mothers get back on their feet when they leave the program.

If family portraits are the first things the mothers can hang on the walls of their new homes -- wherever that may be -- Rouse is optimistic they can help in their little way.

"I hope that's what the pictures do for people. Give them hope," she said. "Because circumstances change. Things change. Especially if you want them to and you push toward it, even a little bit every day."