

ART

Body and soul

Forsaking life as a Jehovah's Witness minister, Serena Davidson turned to photography for salvation

BY JODI DARBY

Portland photographer Serena Davidson exudes calm.

Her presence tends to soothe those around her, she says, in a voice that is steady and thoughtful, her words carefully selected.

The daughter of generations of Jehovah's Witness ministers, her early focus was to become a missionary, and she began life as a minister by age 19.

"I was in the center of my congregation," says Davidson, "but I wasn't happy. There was something inside of me that started saying, 'This isn't working.'"

Heavily restricted by the insular life of devotion, strict sanctity and a religion that frowned on pop culture, Davidson had no idea what was on the outside. "I didn't have to make any decisions about who I was or who I wanted to be. Those decisions were all made for me based on the religious track that I was on."

As long as she can remember, Davidson has had a passion for art. Although this passion was never encouraged by her family, who felt that her energy would be best focused on religious studies, she continued to consider art an important part of her life.

Her parents owned a family portrait studio, which gave her access to photographic equip-

ment and allowed her to learn enough skills to take a great picture as early as age 7. At 19, she was asked to photograph a cousin's wedding.

"She loved the photos," says Davidson, "and it really made me realize how much I knew about photography without even realizing I had learned so much. Still, I didn't really consider myself a photographer until five years ago when I became professional."

After high school, Davidson enrolled in Cornish College of the Arts in Seattle and found herself overwhelmed by a previously unattainable freedom. "I felt like I was finally able to ask myself the question, 'What do I want?'"

While in the Emerald City, Davidson left the religion. "It was like a leap into the abyss. I had no support at that point, especially not from my family, and the whole thing was really pretty horrifying. One of the only things I knew for sure was that I wanted to pursue my art."

Davidson threw herself into artistic expression and explored the parts of herself that had been hidden. She remembers questioning her sexuality in her early 20s but feeling that she could go no further in entertaining that thought. "I wasn't allowed to date boys when I was growing up, much less girls," she laughs.

Leaving the religion gave her the opportunity to access different parts of herself, which included coming out as queer. Photography aided in that process.

Today Davidson continues to explore. Her goal: to create a lifestyle that centers on the spirituality of the creative process. Her portrait photography conveys an obvious care for the subject, and the genuine expression that people reveal in front of her camera is unique and enticing to the viewer.

"When you are photographing someone, it's

a very revealing experience. You're allowed to interact with people on a very different level than you would in your regular day-to-day experiences."

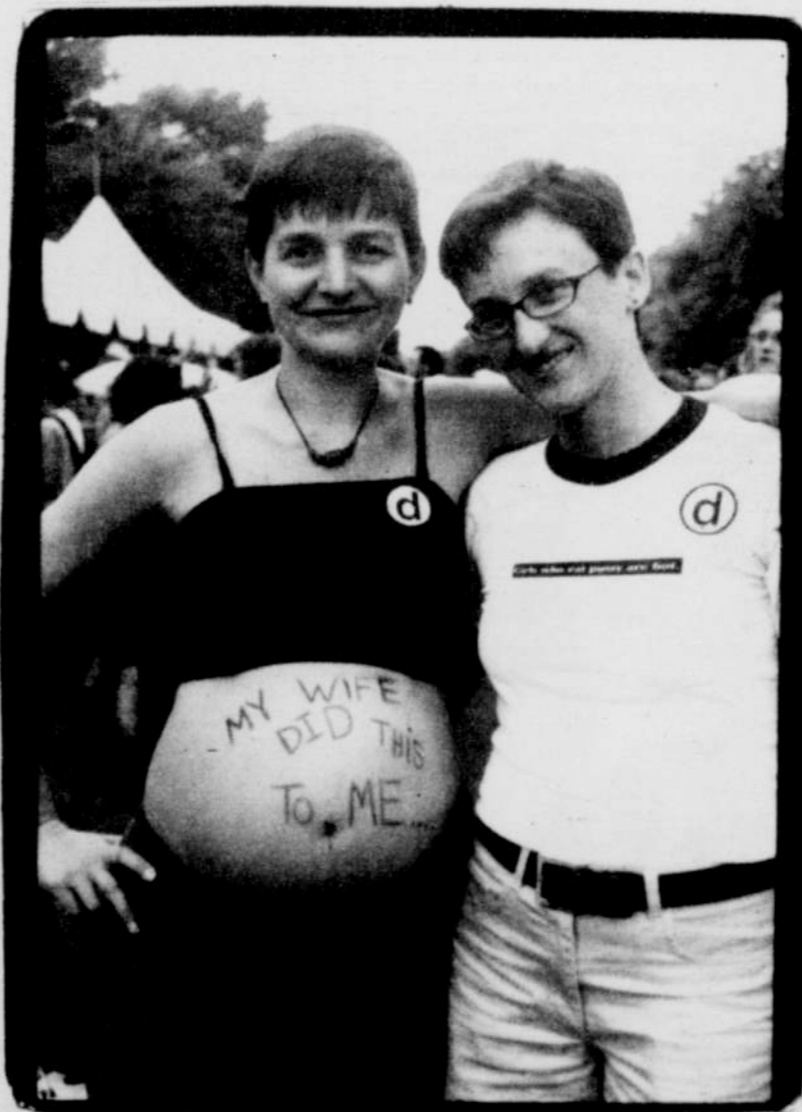
Davidson's interest in people as individuals translates from the years of volunteer Bible teaching work she engulfed herself in while growing up, and her ministry skills have had a direct impact on her art.

"It can be very intimidating to get your portrait done," admits Davidson. But she adds: "Compared to encouraging people to comfortably talk about their most intimate spiritual beliefs, getting them to relax in front of a camera is easy."

At one time, Serena Davidson's life was dedicated to capturing souls. Today she still captures souls, but in a different way—one that allows her own spiritual goals to unfold for themselves. **J**

SERENA DAVIDSON is showing her photographs in collaboration with Mykle Hansen through April 30 at The Fresh Pot, 4001 N. Mississippi Ave. Meet the artist 3 p.m. April 10. For more information visit www.zeitgeistphoto.com.

JODI DARBY is a Portland writer, activist and radio producer.



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