

Gearhart photographer finds inspiration locally

By ISA KAUFMAN-GEBALLE
Coast Weekend

Don Frank is a professional photographer and documentarian based in Gearhart. His most recent gallery exhibition “Summer of Letters” opened last spring at Imogen Gallery in Astoria.

Throughout the coronavirus pandemic, Frank has continued shooting photos for his commercial photographer business. He also has documented local people and businesses affected by the pandemic.

Coast Weekend: How did you get started with photography?

Don Frank: It was always a hobby as a child ... I became the photo editor for the college paper, which was the first real responsible photography thing I did. I just really enjoyed being in the darkroom. What I realized was that photography gave me access to places backstage at political rallies or concerts that I would not have normally been able to see.

CW: How did you transition into your professional career and how did that bring you out here to the Oregon Coast?

DF: After college, I started working and that kind of stuff in another field and realized I didn’t really enjoy that as much. I had a come-to-Jesus moment. Like, “What do I want to do?” I decided I want to be a photographer. Then, I started trying to figure out how to do that ... And so I wound up becoming a photo assistant for a couple of studios in Portland, and that’s where I learned how to be a photographer and a business person. Then I went out on my own in 2001 and moved out to the beach 19 years ago.

CW: How would you describe your photographic style?

DF: Well, most of everything I shoot is out in the world. I’m a commercial photographer. I shoot for businesses, hotels, cities,



Self-portrait by Don Frank.

golf courses, restaurants. The hospitality industry is one of my biggest clients, so that’s on location ... I have had studios out here. Now I can set up space for people for those kinds of things. But I usually travel to where they are.

CW: Can you tell me about your photography exhibition at Imogen Gallery last spring, “Summer of Letters,” which featured images of golf courses?

DF: I’m represented by the Imogen Gallery in Astoria. I have an exhibition there every two years, which is a common artist schedule. It takes time to develop all that. And so I was like, “OK, well, what am I going to do in 2020?” This was in 2018 and unbeknownst that there was going to be a pandemic and global crisis.

I started focusing on golf because I’m a golfer. I have several golfing-type clients from golf courses. And I had this whole philosophy about what it means to golf — and (what it means) to walk a golf course. So I just had this whole plethora of imagery and photography of golf courses from all around the world.

CW: What was it like to have your show opening during the pandemic?

DF: As artists, we spend two years or however long in our lifetime working on that stuff. And so there’s

supposed to be this art walk coming through the gallery. That did not happen. The show was there — but there were no people. So that was a little challenging to deal with. But I’ve said before — those are first world problems. I mean, there are much bigger issues than an empty art gallery ... I just want people to be able to see it for whatever it is. I just think artists need to be truly celebrated as they are trying to figure out the work that is going to come out of this year.

CW: Was this a venture from the work you typically pursued?

DF: I used photographs, but this time I wound up scratching sayings (into them) from movies, famous golfers ... I tried to fit those in with the images to try and personalize them instead of just being photos. But in this process, I discovered this sculptural element using what I call the detritus of the game, which are things that people use one time and then throw away like a pencil and other elements like that. And so I started collecting these items for like two years until I had enough actually to work with. This was a great opportunity to push my creative elements. As an artist, that is important to me — to do different things. A lot of the artists in this area that I really respect and know per-



Don Frank

A photo by Don Frank of a baby with a sandy foot.

sonally — that’s how I think they approach it. I’m just trying to keep up with those people. And that’s how the show became the “Summer of Letters.”

CW: What personally drew you to take photos related to golf? What would you like people to take away from your exhibition?

DF: My personal relationship with golf is about exercise but it’s also kind of a philosophy. It’s a challenge of how to overcome emotions and to celebrate the small victories — not get dismayed by the small failures. I think that I find many similarities between the philosophy of golf and the philosophy of life. It may not be for everybody ... I mean, if you do something you love, then you never work a day in your life.

CW: How has the geography and environmental features of the Oregon coast inspired your photos in the exhibition?

DF: The golf course that I golf at in Gearhart is the oldest golf course on this side of the Mississippi

River, which is pretty cool. The way it’s laid out is very natural. But another thing that’s really important to me is environmentalism. It is something I’ve been an advocate for a long time. And so as far as the Oregon Coast goes, I mean, I think it’s one of the most beautiful places. The access that people have to the beaches ... And I think Oregon itself just has this kind of great ethos about it that it’s pretty mellow. People appreciate the smaller things. It’s not fancy out here but it’s got some real soul to it. When I moved out here almost 20 years ago, it was a little challenging to meet people and stay busy. But I quickly found my people and things to do to keep me busy in the environment and in nature. I love it. I just love it. I don’t

know where else to go.

CW: Do you have any current projects in the works, outside of your commercial photography and exhibitions?

DF: Lately, I have been trying to figure out how to document the pandemic. I just recently started documenting these restaurants that keep closing ... (I am) trying to document what these specific type of businesses are dealing with ... I’ve been poking my nose into restaurants like, “Hi, I’m Don Frank.”

CW: What feedback did you get from these community members?

DF: I’ve been getting a lot of really great feedback exactly along those lines like “Thank you for doing this” but I’ve also gotten an earful all up and down the gamut ... I don’t have a position on it. As a photographer, I’m there to just document it. But it has actually been really eye opening for me to get their point of view cause these are their livelihoods, you know, and I really feel for them. It’s like you’re like documenting history. We’re living in history right now.

CW: What is your advice for artists?

DF: Well, I think the first thing for any artist is just to keep working. That’s the most important thing and develop their ideas. I developed my ideas because the skills come with time. I mean, some people are better than others, or whatever, but everybody’s trying to rise up and become the best artist they can be.

And that takes time. It takes effort and dedication, for sure. I know a lot of artists are nervous about showing their stuff because art is an expression of ourselves. And I understand that. I think that, at some point, you have to get over that and put yourself out there.

Darnell: ‘We have a really strong team here now’

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Ghost Conference.

Over the decades she witnessed the change from low-tech to high-tech management, from booking methods to building features.

“It’s changed a great deal,” Darnell said. “When I first came, everything was done in a three-ring binder. We didn’t have the internet or email, so everything was done sort of by hand and with a lot of phone calls, whereas today most of the business I do is by email.”

The job’s mission remains the same, she added, representing the convention center in a positive way throughout the Northwest.

As for her decision to step down, she said, “It’s time, I guess.”

Notwithstanding restrictions as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, Darnell said she is going out on a high note. “We made it through the expansion, and the calendars are looking



R.J. Marx
Gretchen Darnell at her retirement party.

really good,” she said, with event bookings and signed contracts through 2030.

As Clatsop County moved into the lower-risk category for the coronavirus this month, Darnell looks forward to an increase in attendance. “We will just keep pushing forward and booking clients as we can,” Darnell said.

A silver lining, she said, is that during the pandemic

smaller local groups have been able to use the building. These, in turn, can prove to be ambassadors to statewide organizations like the Oregon Realtors Association or the Oregon Society of Certified Public Accountants.

Darnell raised three children as a single parent while working at the convention center.

Her daughter, Lindsey Darnell, is her oldest, living in Portland with her son. Lauren Oxley is her middle child. She lives in Seaside with her husband, Wyatt, and two daughters.

“Addy Darnell was my youngest child, and she passed December 2014, at age 20,” Darnell said. “She had an emergency liver transplant in 2017, and survived 3 1/2 years with multiple health issues. She died of liver failure, the root cause was Wilson’s disease, which is a rare metabolic disease she was born with.

“One of my other daughters also suffer from the dis-

ease. Addy was the bravest person I have ever known. The city and Russ were so supportive while Addy struggled through health issues, and I am so grateful for that. I took a lot of time off.”

Tina Eilers, the convention center’s office manager, will serve as the interim director of sales. The position will first be advertised in-house, Darnell said, to consider candidates that work for the city. If a candidate is not selected, the search could be widened.

What’s next for Darnell? Spending time with grandchildren, traveling, gardening, walking and volunteering.

“It’s been an honor and a privilege to represent the city in this way for as many years as I have,” Darnell said. “I feel really confident in the team that is here. I leave with full confidence. I know they’ll be in great hands. We have a really strong team here now.”

BRIEFS

Blooming benefit

The Seaside Downtown Development Association presents “Blooming Benefit,” a night to raise money to adorn downtown streets with 64 flower baskets for locals and visitors during the summer months.

Half of all food and beverage sales, eat-in or take-out, at Dundee’s Bar and Grill, will be donated to the flower basket campaign. The event takes place March 9 from 4 to 9 p.m.; enter to win a chance to own a flower basket like the ones downtown, with the drawing at 8:30 p.m. Participants need not be present to win.

Dundee’s Bar and Grill is located at 414 Broadway; 503-738-7006. Order ahead for pickup.

Clinic celebrates first anniversary

Columbia Memorial Hospital celebrated the one-year anniversary of CMH Medical Group & Urgent Care – Seaside, located in the Seaside Outlet Mall. The clinic saw nearly 7,000 patient visits since opening Feb. 17, 2020.

Over the past year the clinic added services and specialties and now sees

patients for primary care, urgent care, podiatry, medical oncology, women’s health, pediatrics, pharmacy, lab, social work and imaging services. There were 1,514 new patient visits to the clinic in 2020.

The clinic’s medical team is made up of several Seaside-based providers and rotating specialists. They are supported by other professionals who work with patients to help them reach health and wellness goals.

The urgent care is open seven days a week, with other services offered Monday through Friday.

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