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Pursuing a Vision

Local Photographer's Workshop-Retreats Help Students Explore Creativity

While Doug Beasley enjoys teaching his Vision Quest photography workshops and receives great satisfaction working with students as they immerse themselves in the "inner feeling" of visual arts, he sometimes has second thoughts about a few of his pupils, many of whom are not professional photographers. Some of them, he says, have become so inspired by the workshops, they have thought about quitting their jobs and beginning a new career in the photographic arts.

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St. Paul photographer Doug Beasley is the subject of a portrait by Bonnie Butler at a Vision Quest workshop in Wisconsin.

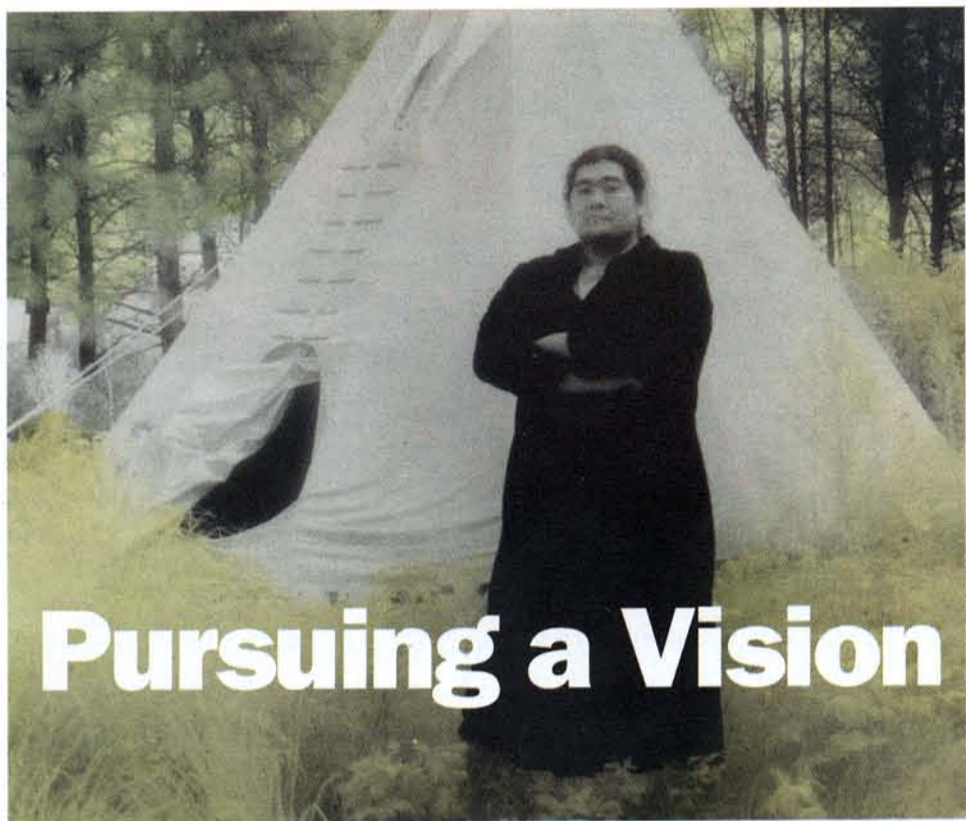


photo by Bonnie Butler

Pursuing a Vision

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"It scares me to think they would give up a regular paycheck and go into something as competitive and risky as photography," says Beasley.

That might be the only element about the Vision Quest photographic retreat centers that has given the St. Paul-based photographer a second thought. His participants, though, typically not only return to their regular jobs, but also return with a new outlook and appreciation of the visual arts.

"There are no other photography workshops that I know of in the Midwest that are quite like the ones Doug and Vision Quest offer," says Clay Atkinson, owner of Market Street Partners, a Minneapolis-based marketing firm.

Laurie Schneider, a St. Paul photographer who deals with a variety of assignments at her studio, agrees: "The only similar ones I know of are in Maine, California and New Mexico and cost at least four times more. And they're not nearly as laid back and enjoyable as the ones Doug has."

This may be why, according to the estimate of one student, about 70 percent of those taking a Vision Quest course return to take at least one more course in the series.

The workshops that Beasley and fellow instructors such as Jim Brandenburg, Rebecca Paslenko and Craig Blackluck conduct do touch on some photographic mechanics, but they do not focus on them. Instead, the classes are designed to bring out greater self expression in the participants and help them discover their own unique personal style. Students often comment on the strong "spiritual side" of the sessions and the positive interaction between the members.

Beasley tries to show through Vision Quest that photography is something that comes from the heart. Content and creativity are the mainstay of the classes. They are, as one student noted, for "getting in touch with yourself."

By keeping class size small (usually eight to 12 people) and by locating workshops in dramatic settings full of photographic opportunities like the Badlands of South Dakota, the Oregon mountains, Ely or scenic areas in Wisconsin—"People open up, both in their minds and in the visual images they produce," says Beasley.

Participants agree.

"I was apprehensive, even a bit terrified, when I first signed up for one of the workshops," says Michael Kennedy, a teacher at Southwest high school, who has now attended four of the sessions. "But I found them to be extremely fulfilling and great for creative thinking. When our group got together at the end of the day and traded our work around, I received a lot of positive criticism that helped me and encouraged me to continue."

Beasley, whose client list includes advertising, public service, educational and non-profit institutions, first became involved with the Vision Quest workshops eight years ago.

At that time, he says, there was hardly anything offered in Minnesota and Wisconsin of what might be called the "inner feeling" of photography.

The workshops were also something that strongly appealed to him.

"Teaching—especially when it is to a motivated group of adults who are eager to improve their skills—is tremendously enjoyable. (Most participants range in age from 30 to 50.) Adults appreciate education more," he says. "It's not just a matter of getting a good grade, as it with students in college. And when you give up a week of your time as they do, you know they want to get the most possible out of the workshop."

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photo by Doug Beasley

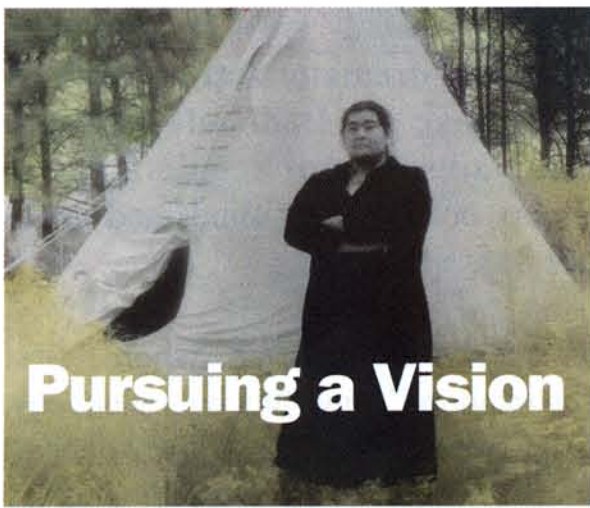


photo by Bonnie Butler

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While Vision Quest workshops now take up the majority of Beasley's time, he remains involved with several other photographic endeavors. He has a studio in Minneapolis, where he does work for commercial clients. Right now, he said, he is primarily involved in producing several annual reports for non-profit groups.

He also teaches at the University of Minnesota and at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design (MCAD). At MCAD, his courses include those on lighting and on acclimating students to working in the business world.

Oddly enough, Beasley began his life work as "the most unlikely fashion photographer around" after graduating from the University of Michigan with a degree in photography. He also studied Eastern religions and Native American culture there.

He came to the Twin Cities and did quite a bit of photographic work for Target and the Dales shopping centers. Later, he was asked to teach at Film of the Cities, which went out of business. But it was there, he says, where he learned that he loved to teach.

His career will soon take on another dimension with the publication of a new book of photographs, expected out within the month, called *Japan, A Nisei's First Encounter*. The book, which was made possible through a Jerome Travel Study Grant and is designed for American audiences, shows—through a dramatic series of black-and-white photographs—how the sacred is incorporated into everyday life in Japan.

For Beasley, whose mother was Japanese, but who had never been to Japan, it was a special trip. "It was like returning to a place I had never been, exotic, yet comfortable and familiar," he says in his brochure describing the book.

The 40-page book portrays photos of Zen Temples, Shinto Shines, Japanese gardens and the Great Torii Gate, plus images of ordinary life, to convey the first impression of a country he hopes to return to again and again. It is to be published in Japanese cross stitching. The graphic work in the book was done by Liz Pangerl of Minneapolis.

That same type of spiritual and "deep-within" feeling is conveyed in the Vision Quest workshops. To ensure close personal attention, the workshops are presented in rich photographic settings in the United States. Prices are usually within \$250 to \$500 for the workshop and materials.

"We try to make these affordable as possible," Beasley says.

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Beasley's forthcoming book features a series of black-and-white photographs, which depict how the sacred is incorporated into everyday life in Japan.



photo by Doug Beasley

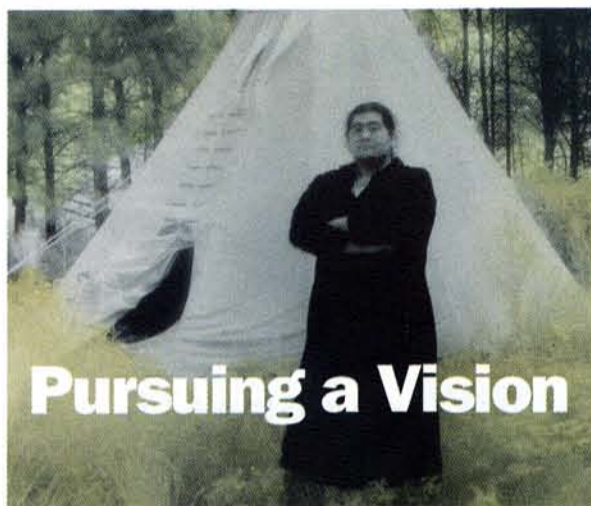


photo by Bonnie Butler

Pursuing a Vision

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Most of the participants take additional Vision Quest courses in a variety of settings. More exotic Vision Quest sessions are offered in such locations as Guatemala, Peru and Ireland. These can cost \$2,000 to \$4,000.

But they are not huge money-making endeavors. Schneider says she is sure Beasley lost money the first year he began the classes and says the prices are very reasonable compared to other workshops in photography and visual arts.

"People come to the Vision Quest workshops not only to learn how to take better quality photos, but to get more in touch with themselves," says Beasley. "We come at them from all directions. We use different types of examples; we might work in quotes from great spiritual leaders, even read poetry. We want people to open up—both visually in their photographs and with themselves.

"While the workshops are open to all levels of experience, the sessions are better suited," he says, "to those looking to expand their vision and creativity, instead of worrying about the mechanics of camera operation.

"That may explain," says Beasley, "why we get a lot of graphic artists, as well as photographers. It also attracts people relatively new to the art of photography. But, while they may lack experience, they come with a great love for the art, and they blend well with those who have more extensive experience.

"We give the students a great deal of hands-on assignments and provide settings that allow students to really explore their abilities," he says. "A workshop is far superior to a class, he says, because you can really immerse yourself in photography. You're there to do nothing but take pictures and reflect upon them. With a class, you're there for a few hours, then go home and transfer your attention to collecting bills or something else."

Schneider agrees:

"With a class, you go home and have to take care of business details. With the workshop, you can continue to concentrate on being creative and come up with so many ideas."

Schneider and Atkinson both comment on the camaraderie and friendships that come out of the workshops. Atkinson said one of his groups got together later for a party.

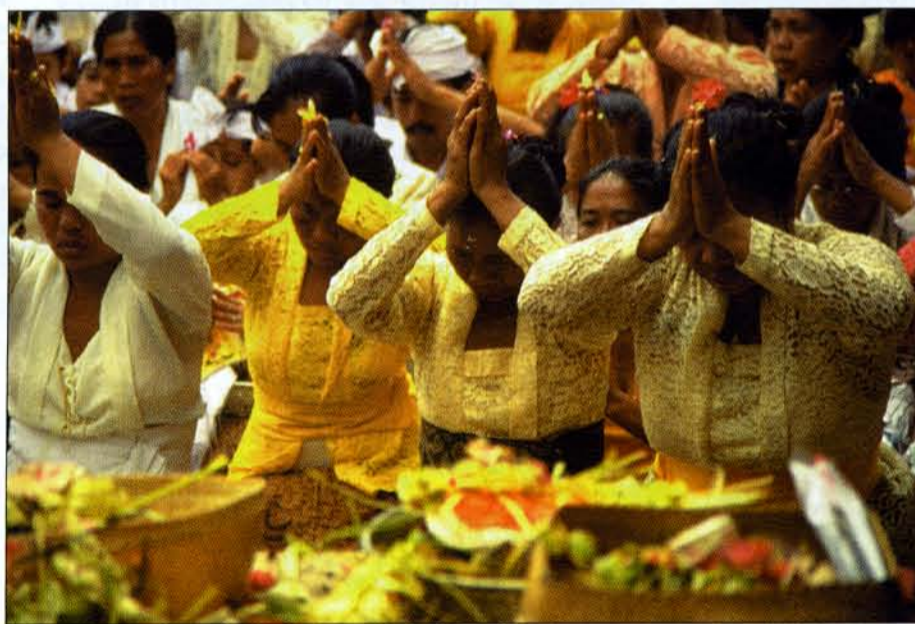


photo by Doug Beasley

Schneider also says that the workshops "are a great way to learn what other photographers are doing."

Schneider, who initially took a Vision Quest course to better connect with the photographic community, says Beasley and fellow instructors "let the participants develop the flow of things. He's very laid-back but educated, very open and just an excellent teacher."

It is long not before the students begin interacting with one another and offer good criticism and encouragement. Even though the participants usually come from different backgrounds, they soon find their love of the visual brings them together.

Atkinson says that sometimes you work individually, sometimes you may work with one other member and sometimes you may work with a group when you are given assignments. "It's whatever makes the creative juices flow."

Atkinson first went to a Vision Quest workshop because photography is an avocation to him and he hopes to have a gallery some day. He found it to be extremely invigorating.

"Doug," says Atkinson, "gets to the emotional side of photography. He is very spiritual. He understands that photos are not just something that produces an image. He gets you to share your love of photography and brings people together.

"While the spiritual side not rubbed in our face, it's for you to discover," he says. "And the relationships from others that grow out of that class were a real added plus."

"The courses are extremely stimulating," says Paul Benavides, who does editorial photography in Minneapolis. "They're not just about photography, but seeing relationships through photography. They tap into conversation, humanity and

what makes us tick," he says. Benavides, who has taken workshops in Wisconsin and Guatemala, says they not only helped him with his work, "but they can be quite spiritual, too. They are definitely unique for around here."

Settings of the workshops are carefully chosen. In one session, located at Ely, near the Boundary Woods Canoe Area, students are challenged to shoot in and around a wilderness area. "They are expected to push the boundaries of image making," says a brochure describing the workshop. Class discussion emphasizes "the spirit of the image and how to use self-imposed limitations to strengthen a person's work."

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