

Ramblings of a Print Competition Newcomer

Yes, my first round of competitions is over — I survived! I laugh now about it, but alka-seltzer, aspirin, and brown paper bags should have been handed out at each competition. Yet, in the end, the whole process was a far cry from the nightmare I had envisioned. Breaking away from that fear of the unknown is vital for newcomers like me. Education and encouragement are two keys that will unlock that door. Perhaps sharing my own first competition experiences will help others feel the same hope and inspiration I now feel.

Over the last two years, I became a member of my local, state, and then national PPA associations. As a newcomer to the field of portrait photography, this was not an easy thing to do financially. However, I thought these memberships were important in order to set myself apart in an overabundant field of novices, of which I was one. I felt the associations would equip me with the necessary skill sets for achieving my goals, including becoming the best artist I can possibly be.

Despite these goals, I shied away from entering my local print competition last year, almost immediately after I joined. After much internal conflict and lots of coaching from a friend and mentor, I entered my local, state, and regional PPA competitions this year with four prints. I learned a great deal, including how helpful and vital the critiques were to the growth of my work's quality. (I took all opinions very seriously and adjusted my prints accordingly in preparation for Regionals.)

I was in awe of the work displayed at the competitions. I can't tell you the number of times I circled the print area at the state competition, going over every print with a fine-tooth comb. When I picked up my print case, I had the opportunity to speak with the competition chair about my work. He was kind, helpful, and very supportive. It was far less painful than sitting through the entire evening of competition at the local level, where I was certain I would either throw up or faint from the stress of it all.

A competition with your peers is the toughest...yet it can be the most rewarding! I stayed with the same four images through all three competitions. When the dust settled, I had three regionally blue-ribbon merited prints. And I hope the critiques that led to the fourth print's tweaks will help it merit at the national level!

What did I learn from my first competitions? What can I share? I seriously pondered those questions the day after our state convention closed. It didn't take much to realize that competing will make me a better photographer—I know I have learned more than I imagined. I go over and over the images in the Loan Collection book, amazed at their quality. It's inspiring. Now, I allow myself to dream that someday one of my prints will go Loan. I would never have entertained that thought a year ago.

I feel honored, but maybe the feeling that sticks with me most is validation. It feels good—really good. I will definitely enter print competition again. If you've thought about entering and never have, consider going for it next year. Here are some tips to help you prepare:

Pair up with a fellow photographer to go over your possible selections and even mentor with them.

Ask one of the many fine Master Craftsmen to go over your selections. They were kind and helpful when I got up the nerve to speak to them one-on-one.

Take one of the classes offered on competition prints. I was surprised at the tiny details that missed my scrutiny but were quickly picked up by the more seasoned eye. Those details made all the difference for me at the regional level.

The importance of helping each other, improving the quality of our work, and challenging ourselves to step up to the next level is critical to the integrity of our profession and our own success. To me, print competition (as scary as it can be) is an essential part of this journey.

Marilyn Sholin said in a seminar at our state convention, "We must be fearless!" That statement is now posted on my wall...beside my blue ribbons. A special "thank you" to Master Craftsman Anne Keesor, a print competition newcomer's dream-come-true for a friend and mentor. I count myself fortunate.

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