



ATLANTA NEWS 8:55 p.m. Friday, November 13, 2009

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Photographer considered 'Olan Mills of the hood'

Sitting before Ben Harry's lens became a rite of passage in SW Atlanta

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By Chandra Thomas
For the AJC

In 1979, Ben Harry had an awesome task before him. Fresh out the Art Institute of Atlanta, the former Army man was trying to launch a photography business, but luring young clients into the studio he'd rigged up inside his modest southwest Atlanta apartment was especially problematic.

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"The Atlanta child murders were going on at that time and the kids were afraid of all adults," recalls Harry, a Poplarville, Miss. native. "And here I was saying, 'hey kid, come in my apartment so I can take your picture.'"

It took months to persuade someone to pose in front of his "backdrops," two living room walls he'd covered with paint left over from his handyman work at the complex. A neighbor's daughter and her friend, both students at the nearby (now-closed) Archer High, finally gave him, well, a shot.

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Jason Getz, jgetz@ajc.com

His own family portrait (lower left) is among Ben Harry's work on display at his Harry's Digital booth at Greenbriar Discount Mall. Harry has been photographing people in metro Atlanta since 1979, including some who later became famous.

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"We showed everybody at school, they loved them and asked, 'Where'd y'all get those done?'" recalls Keica Bridges, 42, of the photos taken with buddy Bernadette Sillman. "We told them, 'Right across the street at Harry's apartment.'"

By the end of the school day, continues Harry, "I had 15 kids in my living room ready to get their picture taken."

Little did those BFFs know that they'd help launch a popular Atlanta photography business that would ultimately serve generations of Atlantans, including Tionne "T-Boz" Watkins of the pop and hip-hop group TLC, R&B singer Monica and even Mayor Shirley Franklin, before they were household names. At its height, Harry's business also included seven studios and a processing lab — all in predominantly black communities where portrait studios were scarce.

"We didn't have a lot of options back then so he was like the Olan Mills of the 'hood,'" says longtime former employee Heather Peppers-Miller, 36, of southwest Atlanta. "The only other option was Kmart, but with Harry's you got that personal touch."

This year marks Harry's 30th anniversary in business. With the help of his wife, Mary, and four children, he continues to operate Harry's Digital (formerly Harry's Photography) from a conspicuous corner of the Greenbriar Discount Mall on Headland Drive, not far from his former flagship location at the Greenbriar Flea Market. And, like many of Harry's faithful fans, his first two clients remain loyal customers. ("They'll never pay for a picture," he says.) Only now it's their offspring cheesing it up for his camera.

"He wasn't just a photographer, he also steered us the right way in life," says Bridges, a nurse.

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Jason Getz , jgetz@ajc.com

Harry situates Tiauna Antoine of Atlanta for a portrait. His photo business, now in its 30th year, has had locations across Atlanta.

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Ben Harry

This photo was taken in 1987 of Tionne "T-Boz" Watkins of TLC.

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Ben Harry

This portrait of Shirley Franklin and her daughter Kali was done in 1993.

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Her children and grandchildren are now dedicated customers. "I don't have a dad, so he was like a dad to me. He was always there to listen to us and give us advice. He helped mold me."

Harry and his crew also shoot family and class reunions and other special events around town, but his business has scaled down considerably. In the early '90s his studios spanned the metro area, including locations at Greenbriar, downtown Atlanta on Peachtree Street near Underground Atlanta, Decatur and College Park. Sure, his signature low-price packages, for many years a modest \$11.95 including a \$5 deposit, were a big draw. But his loyal clientele contend that they still flock to Harry because of his high quality work, superior customer service and long-standing commitment to the community.

"It's not like you're just sitting for a photo at Sears, it's a family thing with Harry," explains Bridges. "When you're there you can just feel the sincerity in what he does. He takes his time."

Former colleague and longtime friend Larry Bradley of Alpharetta calls Harry a "survivor."

"It's amazing that he continues to make it at a time when studios all over the country went out of business," says Bradley, whose family owned the film processing lab Harry used before opening his own. "Ben does good work. I don't think anyone would support him this long if he didn't."

A wall in Harry's current studio features his recent work — everything from chubby-cheeked infants posing in mailboxes to grinning couples in a loving embrace. But it's nothing like the famous wall prominently featured in his studios back in the day, particularly at the Greenbriar and downtown locations.

"It started off as a way to show the different poses, but then it got to a point where everybody wanted their picture up," says Peppers-Miller, who never missed out on her employee perk of one free photo a month, a downgrade from the twice monthly Harry's habit she and her friends developed during her days at D.M. Therrell High School. "It got to a point where we'd have to redo the wall every two weeks. Some people would actually wait to take their pictures on that week to make sure their picture got on the wall!"

Prom season, adds Peppers-Miller, was always crazy.

"The limos and cars would be lined up Peachtree Street," says Peppers-Miller, now owner of Little Footprints, a small local photography business. "Some people would even come all dressed up on MARTA! We'd be working until two and three o'clock in the morning, because everybody wanted their picture shot at Harry's."

Harry has seen it all in front of his signature scarlet backdrop — horrendous hairstyles, debauching duds and gaudy gold-plated jewelry. Before cellphones, some teens actually brought in corded telephones and posed with one ear cradled by the receiver. Then there was that time a brawny guy came in just before closing with a bag ready for his photo shoot.

"He went into the back to change and three minutes later I swear he came back looking just like Diana Ross," says Harry. "There was another customer in there taking pictures with his 4-year-old son at the time. He looked at that guy and said, 'Son, we gotta go!'"

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Harry also recalls when a regular customer, a physically challenged guy, came in dateless on prom night. Harry asked for any young lady in line to pose with him. "About 12 of them stepped up and he took the photo with all of them surrounding him," recalls Harry. "He was grinning from ear-to-ear, like it was the happiest day of his life."

A modest Harry admits that he's proud of his momentous milestone.

"It makes me feel like I lived the life I wanted to," he says. "Any time I second-guess that, one of my customers walks up and that lets me know that I've done it the right way. I'm going to take pictures as long as photography is photography."

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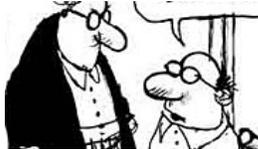


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