

# Life through a lens

Photographer Neil Shelby Long tells Ella Johnston about days in the studio and why his disability never means he has to miss out on the fun of a music festival.

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To meet the ultimate 'people person', make a date with Neil Shelby Long. Throughout his professional life, from 12 years as a customs official, to taking the plunge and changing his career to become a photographer, Neil has made people his life's work.

*"During my time in Customs, I dealt with all sorts of people in all kinds of situations. I've done stake-outs, carried out searches and conducted high pressure interviews. In all of these scenarios it's vital that you try and understand peoples motivations and that those you're dealing with feel okay around you – fundamentally they need to see you as a person not a uniform. Otherwise, in my experience, you'll get nothing out of them."*

The regimented world of Her Majesty's Customs and Excise might seem a million miles away from the bright lights and glamour of the photography studio, but Neil believes his time there was well spent. *"Although I didn't particularly enjoy working in Customs, there are aspects of the job that are very similar to what I do now,"* he says. *"When you put people in front of a lens they feel scrutinised and self-conscious. An essential part of my job as a photographer is putting people at their ease; making sure they're relaxed enough for my photograph to portray 'the real them'."*

*"My previous life also taught me how to be disciplined and organised,"* he continues. They're the crucial qualities you need in photography. If I'm doing a portrait of the head of a major company, for example, there's no time to mess about. I always make sure I liaise with their PA first; I arrive early so I can set up before they arrive and make sure the while experience is seamless for them – so once they're in the room I can concentrate on getting that special shot".

Neil has put in a lot of work to get those special shots. Over the twelve years while he had the 'day job', Neil used his spare time to hone his talents and build up his technical photographic skills, attending evening courses and investing in cameras and lighting equipment. He also made sure he got some practical work experience under his belt – even spending days in the studio with renowned Page 3 photographer Jeanie Savage: *"That was an experience I can tell you!"* says Neil: *"But she was always the ultimate professional."*

Describing himself on his Twitter website profile as 'The world's greatest one-armed photographer', Neil also has congenital defects to his right foot, knee and hip. His left arm is half length and only has one digit, while his right hand only has three digits.

Neil finally made the break from Customs last year and has been a full-time photographer ever since. He now boasts a portfolio of both corporate and celebrity clients – as diverse as St John Ambulance and 'hairstylist to the stars' Lee Stafford. He recently had the opportunity of photographing Conservative party leader David Cameron at a St John's event.

*"That was incredibly interesting," says Neil. "Observing Cameron gave me a real insight into the world of the modern-day politician. They have to be so professional at all times and careful not to put themselves in a position where they might look stupid in front of the camera. It's another fascinating thing about being a photographer – you get an insight into how someone wants to be seen. If Cameron wins the next election I'd love to do a portrait of him with the cabinet."*

On the day of a photoshoot, Neil's alarm goes off at 6.15am. After saying goodbye to his wife and taking his daughter to school, he heads back to 'the office' for a pick-me-up coffee. Next he gets his kit together, making sure his camera lenses are clean. Once everything is ready to go, it's on to the computer to check his emails and print off a copy of the shoot details.

After he has loaded up the car, he picks up his assistant, Cat, who helps on shoots, lifting equipment, checking lighting settings and changing lenses. *"When we get to a location, the first thing to do is decide where to do the shoot,"* says Neil. *"You usually need to get a few different shots, so you might need to set up a white backdrop in one room, and set up more lighting in another place for more 'in-situ' type shots. This is where Cat is invaluable. She carries, sets up equipment, helps check lighting, then sits in for the model when I do test shots to check everything is right".*

After a morning's preparation, the actual shoot is often over within half an hour and it's time to pack everything away again. But that's not the end of the day: *"I then have to head back to the office and start the long part of the job, processing all the hundreds of digital images,"* says Neil.

A self-confessed people-watcher, Neil loves all aspects of portrait photography – from capturing spontaneous moments in reportage shots to perfecting striking iconic images on highly stylised fashion shoots. *"I have to leave my ego at the door as a photographer,"* he says. *"For me it's about being able to tell other people's stories through an image. That could be perfecting someone's vision in terms of a hairstyle or fashion look, or it could be doing a real-life portrait for a magazine like Lifestyle – or even portraying the energy and atmosphere of a rock music concert. I'm a very visual person and my job lets me tell visual stories."*

As well as his more formal, corporate work, Neil has recently immersed himself into the world of music photography, covering last year's Latitude festival. It's an area he talks about with a real sense of excitement: *"I believe music is very important to the creative process,"* he explains. *"I've always loved music and you'll find everything on my iPod from Abba to Marilyn Manson. My music photography has enabled me to gain access into worlds I'd never have been able to otherwise. That's what's so great about taking photos – it can take you into so many different areas and introduce you to new people, places and experiences. I love it."*

Incredibly ambitious, Neil has a wealth of ideas for future photography projects. *"I'd love to do a series of portraits of comedians; one showing their 'public / funny' face and another capturing their private side,"* he says. *"With most comedians their whole persona is to be outrageous, so imagine what kind of images you'd get!"* He is also incredibly pragmatic, forward thinking and is keen to expand his repertoire, looking at new photographic technology as a way to bring a better service to his clients.

*"Incorporating video into my photography is the next challenge," he continues. "I think in future my work has got to be what we call cross-platform – meaning it will be published both in print and online – as it's what more and more people want these days. I've just been to a series of talks and shows that look at these new cameras that act as a conventional camera but also shoot high definition video too. Yeah, it does appeal to the geek in me, but more importantly it's likely that this will be the future."*

Neil is still perfecting his craft, but what advice would he give to others who want to pursue a similar dream? *"It's simple – just go for it," he says. "Personally I admire images that are simple in execution and make you think about the subject. I'd love to inspire other people the way some photographers have inspired me. Being paid to take pictures is a dream come true. For years my job made me unhappy and now I look around and I see people still doing that; spending days, weeks, months, years doing something they don't want to do. I'm so glad I made the change."*

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