

PORTRAIT of a photographer

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writer

The kids are wearing uncomfortable clothes. The parents desperately want a holiday picture. It's Jenny Multer's job to get the shot. She has 30 minutes to do it.

The lead photographer at Flash Digital Portraits arrives as Vancouver mall opens. She hangs her winter coat and walks straight to the storefront's glass-encased studio. Shoppers already are whizzing by, and peeking in, as ubiquitous Christmas music plays.

This is the portrait photographers' busiest time of year, and Multer can tell that her first clients of the day are going to be a challenge. The family of four, including a 6-year-old boy and 2-year-old girl, appears anxious to begin.

The parents tell Multer that they want a photo of the two kids, who are wearing pressed and matching outfits. The little girl, Lilli, defiantly announces that she won't be having her picture taken. The mother, Electra Kirkley, slips a piece of candy in her mouth.

Multer slides off her shoes, gets on her hands and knees, and starts crawling around the studio floor, trying to get the kids in position on a bench while keeping them entertained. Multer rings a bell. She raises the pitch of her voice to Betty Boop-ish level. She laughs. She trills. Lilli sits still for a single shot, then hops up. Her mother gives her more candy. She sits again. Another flash. Lilli is up.

"Let's go home and go to bed," her father, Ian Kirkley, says in frustration. It's just a few minutes after 9 a.m.

Multer is one of only about 130,000 Americans that make a living with a camera, according to recent census data. In this country, adults are six times more likely to be a



Vancouver mall has four portrait studios, where hundreds of children are being brought this time of year for holiday pictures. (DAVID PLECHL for The Columbian)

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doctor. The median annual salary for a photographer, though, is \$26,000, and about half of them work for themselves.

Besides dreams of starting her own studio -- primarily shooting weddings, births and high school seniors -- Multer wants to be able to take pictures outside of a mall. She would like to use natural light, be more creative. She thinks she could make more money. After seven years of this kind of studio work, Multer can't imagine that her future artistry will be limited to coercing young kids and pets to cooperate for the camera.

J.C. Penney's portrait studio, owned by the same company as Flash, hired Multer at 18 because she showed interest and enthusiasm when she came in to have pictures taken with her family members. The 25-year-old's only formal training has been the two weeks of prep given by the company. She's been learning about the business on the job ever since.

From late September on

Portrait photographers start getting busy with holiday work before Halloween. By the time December finally comes, the pace is frantic. Multer has been working six days a week since late September. She volunteered to work her last day off, so she's in the middle of a nearly two-week straight stretch and is sniffing from a cold.

The 2-year-old girl, Lilli, is back on the bench, ready for another try. Multer waves a teddy bear. She takes another shot. Lilli's up. She's crying. Multer gives her a book to read. More candy. Lilli sits. Another shot. Lilli's up. Her dad takes her for a walk. They come back. The little girl finally flops on the floor in protest.

"Do you want to go see Santa? Or do you want to go home?" her father growls.

One of the Flash receptionists offers to get Lilli a balloon. Before she can return, the Kirkleys are gone, saying they will try back later.

"People want their Christmas cards to get sent out," Multer says. "So they'll do anything to get that picture."

Multer adds that from observing others, she's learned not to battle with her kids anymore when they don't want to sit still, no matter how much effort she's put into setting up a shot. She just tries again at another time, on another day.

The studio is directly across the concourse from a toy store. That gives parents another option this time of year, Multer says: "bribery."

Flash has six photographers on its 19-person staff, all female. Typically, they shoot photos for 30 minutes, then process images for 30 minutes, repeating that cycle over and over. But when it's really busy, like this month, they often just keep shooting. Multer usually completes eight to 10 sessions a day. She has photographed as many as 15

different sets of clients in a single shift. But that's still a better pace than J.C. Penney, she says, where photographers were allowed just 10 minutes in the studio per customer. "There are times," she says, "that you can't help but feel mechanical."

The move up the ranks from J.C. Penney to Flash wasn't about money. Multer received an increase of 50 cents an hour. She mostly was attracted by the idea of getting triple the amount of time with each subject.

Multi-tasking

Photographers at Flash don't just take pictures and process images. They also are expected to answer phones, chat with prospective customers and sell photo packages. Multer on this day noticed a group of people standing around in the back of the shop, so she asked if she could help. They ended up ordering about \$600 worth of photographs. Multer doesn't get a commission on any of the work she does. She earns an hourly rate of \$10.85. The company, meanwhile, expects each half-hour sitting to generate at least \$185 worth of business.

A few hours later, the Kirkleys have come back for one more try. The father, Ian, is talking on his cellular telephone when they arrive. As soon as Lilli realizes where she has ended up again, she starts to fuss and squirm. The mother, Electra, tells Ian, "Get off! I need you." He quickly hangs up and takes more candy out of his pocket.

The 2-year-old becomes entranced as Multer pops a ball into the air while making pffft sounds. Lilli's older brother plays along when Multer asks him to get on the studio floor.

"Ride him like a horsey," Multer tells Lilli. "Get him!"

Lilli laughs as she jumps on her brother's back. Multer gets the shot.

"Get him again!" Multer then deftly moves the kids into a couple of traditional poses. This time, Lilli is happy and smiling. She puts an ornament on a small Christmas tree. She hugs her brother. Multer gets a few more shots, then signals to the parents that she has what she needs.

Lilli cheers, "I did it!"

Multer quickly begins editing the pictures as the Kirkleys gather their things. For her, there's no time to celebrate. Another session starts in just a few minutes.

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