

Business • Perspective

How a government paralegal mastered portrait photography to make millions



By **Thomas Heath** Reporter October 27, 2017

I've written about a lot of people who quit their jobs to launch a business. Some fall flat. Some find financial independence and the self-satisfaction of being their own bosses.

The hard part here isn't so much the bravery of saying adios to a regular paycheck. It's building the business into a success.

"You do what you have to do," Jeff Lubin said.

Lubin, 68, is a former paralegal with the Library of Congress who became a multimillionaire after spending four decades building a brand as a portrait photographer.

Lubin pulls down a comfy \$800,000 a year. He works when he feels like it and drives a snazzy red Lexus. He has Nationals season tickets, lives in leafy Fairfax County, golfs around the world, and chats up the rich and famous while he takes their picture. Clients include sports stars (Cal Ripken Jr., Doc Walker) and entertainers (Lynda Carter), but also families and children.

One key to Lubin's success has been putting himself in the sweet spot where the swells who can afford to pay thousands for a family portrait gather — upscale malls, charity auctions — and there's also plain word of mouth.

"I was in five mall galleries at one time, the Galleria at Tysons II, Tysons I, Mazza Gallerie, Dulles Town Center and Pentagon City Mall," he said, "which established my brand."

He may do the rich and famous, business executives and law firms, but his core business is families and children. The Lubin studio photographs and/or paints about 400 portraits a year.

It ain't cheap. Depending on finishes and frames, a desk-size image is \$525 to \$825. Wall-size portraits on fancy canvas run \$2,000 to \$20,000. Lubin's specialty is what he calls full-size "original art Florentine paintings." Those run between \$12,000

and \$32,000 and are painted by an artist with whom he contracts.

“I am one of the very few, high-end bricks-and-mortar studios left in the D.C. area specializing in portraits,” Lubin said.

Creating that niche has been a decades-long slog.

Starting out, when he didn’t have enough money to rent wall space in malls for his portraits, the chatty self-promoter would carry a 30-inch-by-30-inch framed child’s portrait around the mall as though he were heading somewhere.

“Every so often,” he said, “people would stop me and say, ‘Oh what a beautiful portrait of a child.’ ”

Lubin would produce a business card and be on his way. When he reached his goal of 20 cards, he would head to the next mall. (Mall security guards eventually shut him down.)

It worked. He grossed \$75,000 the second year of business and reached \$275,000 by the fourth year.

“I was driven by both fear of not supporting my family and a commitment not to fail,” he said.

He moved his studio to wealthy McLean in 2000.

“I was doing weddings at Ralph Evans’s Evans Farm Inn for the high-end people who came through,” he said. “I did some grip-and-grin stuff, political photos where you bring in politicians.”

A big break was renting space to hang his photographs in the hallways at the Galleria at Tysons II. He even rented space inside Neiman Marcus’s children’s department. Thousands saw his work.

“My phone rang off the hook.”

Revenue grew to \$1.3 million in 2011, of which about one-third represents his personal income.

Pretty good for a kid who grew up in New Jersey, the son of a factory worker and stay-at-home mom. He dropped out of high school to join the Navy and then went back to graduate at 21 after an honorable discharge.

He bounced around Greenwich Village, where he played with a band and met fabled performers such as Jimi Hendrix and Richie Havens. Lubin left for Washington, where he received a bachelor’s degree in business at Strayer College while working and raising a family.

He worked 16 years in the copyright office at the Library of Congress, spending his free time poking around artsy stuff and shooting weddings to sate his creative urge.

“It gave me food for life,” he said. “I wasn’t a machine.”

He eventually went to photography technical school at night and apprenticed under famed Silver Spring portrait artist Monte Zucker, honing his photo and business skills.

Lubin's first studio was 400 square feet above a sports clothing store in a strip mall in Springfield. After getting off work at the Library of Congress about 3 p.m., he would head to the strip mall for another six hours.

The long days were too stressful on his family, so he took a huge risk: He quit his government job — with its benefits and security — at 36 and became a full-time small-businessman.

“It was a huge gamble, with a wife, two young children and a mortgage,” he said of the move. “But I felt dead-ended in the government job.”

Once the business took off, he watched his costs like a hawk and saved like mad.

“My greatest fear was somehow getting hurt or not being able to work, with no money to support my family,” he says. “Once I had built up a nest egg, I was finally able to relax and put my full effort into building a retirement fund.”

Now, his Fairfax studio is a mini-portrait gallery, featuring Nationals first baseman Ryan Zimmerman and his bulldog Milo, actress-entertainer Carter, fitness guru Denise Austin, and former Redskins player Walker and his family.

Everything starts at a get-to-know-you session with the client.

Lubin needs to know the client's goals. If it involves a husband and wife, usually both attend the hour-long session. Every portrait tells a story.

To get there, Lubin needs to know what the client wants. Where is the portrait going to go in the home? Are children and pets involved?

The photo session is another day and lasts an hour.

“People lose their intensity after a certain amount of time, especially children,” Lubin said. “The photographer needs to be prepared right away for what you are doing. You have to find the real truth, the art.”

The best portraits come from a relaxed subject.

“I have a conversation with them to get their mind off what I'm doing. What do you do? Where did you grow up? What do you like to do?” he said. “I wait, and I anticipate. If you can't do this in an hour, you are in the wrong business.”

He has toured for Kodak, lectured to photography groups worldwide and had his work exhibited at Epcot Center.

With a fat bank account and some measure of prestige, Lubin is living the life.

“I’m 68 and at a point where I will work three days but not Saturday,” he said. “I want to be relevant. If you’re not working, you are not relevant. But I don’t want the business to own me, like it did in the past.”

A recent client is the U.S. military’s court of appeals, which is paying him six figures to photograph its seven judges, whose portraits will hang on the prestigious walls of the court. “These portraits will be up there forever,” he said. “I will be dead, and they will still be there.”

So will the thousands of other portraits he has done.

 **37 Comments**

Thomas Heath is a local business reporter and columnist, writing about entrepreneurs and various companies big and small in the Washington metropolitan area. Previously, he wrote about the business of sports for The Washington Post’s sports section for most of a decade.  Follow @addedvalueth