

## On the Job: Taking Pictures With Penn 360

Spring 2018

Ken Stager always had a “knack” for taking photographs. This, he declares, is how most photographers get started, with an interest in photography and not having the money for it. But what really brought him attention, and eventually a career, was a once in a life-time shot of a soccer teammate getting kicked in the face.

This was a restaurant league he played in with friends from work. “I had broken my foot two weeks prior,” He explains. From the sidelines where he was drinking beer and taking photos, “I watch this dude just get kicked in the face, I get this glorious picture...the guy got knocked out cold.” That guy would reach out over Facebook a few days later and ask Ken if he had managed to get a picture of the event, which he gladly sent to him.

Two and a half years later, working the Insomnia Cookie truck on Temple’s Campus, Ken sees this same guy, now running a start-up business in real-estate photography, complaining about how hard it is to find a reliable photographer. Just like that, Ken is his first employee. This gig lasted two years, during which he developed strong professional relationships with others in the real-estate business. At 25 years old, Ken decided to be his own boss, and started his own company, Penn 360. His first clients were those who followed him from his previous employer, impressed not only by his work but also how easy to get along with Ken is. He uses the word “goofy” a lot, which is an appropriate way to describe the affable, big fella behind the camera.

It is 9 am on a Tuesday, and Ken is starting his workday. His office is cluttered despite lacking furniture; the exception being the massive desk for his massive computer and sound system. I am sitting on a stack of Dewalt tool cases. There is a *Lego* firetruck on the floor beside me, complete with working lights and a hose, and a *Lego* Saturn V rocket that he is especially proud of. “They seem like good office decorations,” he says. There are several drones too, but these are not toys. These are for work.

He is wearing a flyers cap over his shaggy hair, a hooded sweatshirt, and khaki shorts. Taking the final swigs from his Monster energy drink before tossing it on his overflowing bin of empty cans, he announces, “We had better get going, if you don’t mind.”

He has clients throughout the tri-state area who require glamour shots of custom homes, refurbished rentals, and flippers. Much of a professional photographer’s time is spent doing things other than taking pictures. He puts over 25,000 miles a year on his vehicle just

getting from site to site. Today, Ken has two locations lined up to photograph (which he calls a short day) and will spend the afternoon answering emails, scheduling other shoots, and of course, processing his photos. Ken is married, no kids yet, and is planning his upcoming 30<sup>th</sup> birthday bash this summer. His average day is 12-13 hours long, which he keeps up 5 days a week. It's a grueling schedule that Ken laments is partly due to not being able to hire employees.

Reliable help that can learn this skill and has their own transportation is not so easy to come by, but a bigger problem is his clients. They, he says, believe he has some kind of "magical ability" that can't be trained into another photographer. When he was able to find and hire decent help, his clients would complain and even refuse to allow anyone but him to take the photographs. The first piece of advice Ken gives to aspiring photographers, just moments after going over why it is so hard to find one to work for him, is not to go to school for photography. "There's no jobs in photography." He isn't wrong: after the advent of digital relegated darkrooms to the art and hobby world, high-quality cameras have since appeared on almost every phone and software is easy to acquire and use. Even the news media is taking photographs from locals' Twitter accounts rather than paying professionals. But still, he likes what he does. "I'm never in the same place twice. If I am, it's because there's a problem." He laughs, "it's goofy, unorthodox work."

His first "real" jobs were in music photography: live shows and friends' bands needing promotional material. In 2016, he filmed The Snails, a local Philadelphia band, for NPR's *Tiny Desk* Contest. No, he does not do weddings. He avoids them "*like the plague*."

Surprisingly, Ken feels the same way about working in Philadelphia. He is originally from Grand Rapids Michigan. He left in the wake of Ford and General Motor's most recent layoffs to find better opportunities. Or, as he puts it, "I got sick of not having a job." He complains that he found work too fast once he moved here, assuming it would take at least a few weeks, giving him time to explore the city.

Ken is honest about the city he lives and works in. "I try not to work in Philly. I get parking tickets all the time." He laughs, but then maintains he has serious complaints about Philadelphia real estate and the working environment. Today, 95% of his business is in real estate. He finds that there is less accountability and attentiveness, such that often he is the one telling agents that a property is not ready when he arrives at a location to photograph. His job is to help people sell their properties, but the market conditions make it so "they can take a crooked, upside-down picture of the floor and it wouldn't matter."

Based on his observations, the Philadelphia real estate market is a bubble. “Everything’s overpriced. The funny thing about crashes,” Ken says matter-of-factly, “only homeowners get fucked. I’m somewhat impervious to the market. If we were to see a crash, I’d have more business than I knew what to do with.” He admits that in fact, he is sick of real estate. The market conditions mean that a lot of characterless homes, made to be cheap, are selling fast. He describes his work as a job people would kill for, but he has found himself bored. He recently landed his first architecture firm as a client, and this is the direction in which he wants his business to move.

“My clients care about price a lot more than quality. I want someone to tell me to give them my best, as opposed to sweating the cost.”

The first stop today is a two-story townhouse with a finished basement. The homeowner, a young professional with a fiancé and an adorable dog, is present along with Tara, the real-estate agent listing this house. She is dressed all in black: blouse and jacket, modest skirt, high boots with heels, and jewelry that is flashy but not gaudy. She carries a coffee that at no point does she ever set down.

The house is clean and modern, with an enormous couch and shelves adorned with “vintage” Coke boxes and “antique” train lanterns. Ken brings in his tripod and a large, complex camera. He begins repositioning some items around the kitchen counters. He doesn’t usually have a plan before he comes into a shoot, he says. Generally, upon entering each room, he decides which is the “biggest corner,” that is the corner that makes the room look biggest by capturing the most in the shot. Ken’s rule of thumb is “Show as many things as you can in as few photos as possible. By the time I am done, I want people to know how a house flows without looking at a floorplan.”

At some point, Tara, the homeowner, the dog, and I get banished to the second story landing where we are completely out of Ken’s way while he finishes photographing the living room. Tara has no inside voice as she describes the training program for new agents she runs at the office. The most aggressive hires will be the most successful agents, like Evan, her newest pupil, who attempted to pilfer one of *her* clients, feigning ignorance when she pointed out that the listing he cold-called had identified her as the agent by name and photo. She isn’t angry about this; she calls this move “ballsy,” and predicts he will be hugely successful in real estate. “I shouldn’t say this,” she tells me, “I’m going to say this quietly, so he can’t hear me. Ken is the best in the business.”

The response comes a second later: “Hey, I’m at the bottom of the stairs.”

Good-natured ribbing aside, Tara is serious. She always sets Ken up to photograph houses for the new agents to assist in the training process. His experience in making houses look good ensures he catches anything that the fresh agent misses or doesn't recognize as being important.

We get the all clear that he is finished downstairs, and after Ken steps outside to take pictures of the front of the house, we pack up the giant tripod and camera again and head back on the road.

"It's really goofy being in people's houses all day," he tells me, "very strange." He marvels at the things people will say and do while he is present in their homes. He refers to this phenomenon as "people in their safe space." He encounters various levels of casual to grossly ignorant racism, being greeted at the door with firearms, and a gentleman who grew defensive when he was advised that his Nazi memorabilia might not only be misconstrued in the photos meant to sell his home but might also invite the type of person who would come to his open house to do harm in response to their very presence.

The second stop is a large house in a residential suburb in Cherry Hill, New Jersey. He curses under his breath as a large van sits in the driveway and a landscaping and cleaning crew are already at work. Ken gets out and greets them, explains who he is, and it is apparent that everyone knows the drill, so they quickly arrange to move out of each other's way and Ken gets the job done in about 30 minutes. We enter past a staircase adorned with painted white wrought iron railing and burgundy carpet from the 70s, a kitchen with yellowed appliances, missing linoleum, and no trim, and an upstairs bedroom that appears to have hosted a sickbed. "They're not all mansions," he remarks as he photographs a room with rainbows and mushrooms painted across one of the bright blue walls. These are the unknowns at every job: will it be ready to shoot, or will it take 30 minutes of moving stuff around first? This empty and slightly neglected property will take some software finesse to make the finished product attractive, but that it just part of the job.

I ask, since this is a vacant property that has yet to see a for sale sign posted, if he has ever had the cops called on him. Apparently, it happens a lot, and Ken finds it very amusing. "All the time, oh yeah," he confirms, and proceeds with his impression of an old woman calling the police, mimicking a Jersey accent and high pitch voice: "Yes, police? There's a strange man out hee-ya at the house across the street-oh my gawd, he's got a camera, *I think he's takin' pick-chas!*"

After he wraps up in Cherry Hill, we return to his office, where Ken breaks gets to work on retouching and uploading his photographs for his clients. We part ways and as I wait outside the office for my ride, I hear a mix of metal and late 90s hip-hop blaring from the massive speaker system Ken sports in his workspace. He is a pretty goofy guy, but serious about his work, and I can see why his clients enjoy working with him.