

Why trash a gorgeous gown when client and photographer can use it as a point of inspiration and daring? Get post-wedding creative.

WEDDINGS

BY ERIC MINTON

Rocking it smart

Carrie Wildes combines engineering logic and creative flair

Carrie Wildes, CPP, is an engineer by study, a technician by trade, an entrepreneur by vocation. Brides are traditional by tendency, cautious by necessity, overwhelmed by reality. But when it comes to a “rock the dress” photo session, the bride gets to go a little crazy in her wedding attire, and Wildes gets to let down her creative hair, too.

“For a photographer, those kinds of ses-

sions help you keep your work from getting stale; you can do whatever you want,” says the owner and CEO of Carrie Wildes Photography, Art, Design in Tampa, Fla. Not that she isn’t creative in the rest of her work, but with a rock the dress—nee, trash the dress—session, she’s not on a strict timeline or tied to an agenda. “You can spend the time to be creative and do different things than you would do on the wedding day.”

Wildes, an industrial engineer, launched her photography business in February 2008. Her studio now shoots about 75 weddings a year. By her estimate, only some 10 percent of her wedding clients book rock the dress sessions, but the market is growing. “I’ve heard of [trash the dress] since I started,” says the 33-year-old Wildes, but it was new to the Tampa Bay area. She hasn’t actively marketed it beyond a gallery on her website, but it’s definitely getting more popular, she says.

The name change helped. “I stopped calling it trash the dress when a mom got upset that we used ‘trash’ and ‘dress’ in the same sentence,” Wildes says. “Rock the dress sounds nicer to moms who are more traditional.”

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Wildes considers the photo sessions themselves a vital part of the wedding memories. So much effort and cost go into selecting and fitting a wedding dress for just one day of wear and a lifetime in a sealed box. "For a girl who wants to do something fun and different, instead of packing the dress up and putting it in a closet, she can wear it again and look back and remember how she planned it and how much fun it was," Wildes says.

Wildes' creativity comes into play in the session planning stage. A few couples know what they want, but more often she presents ideas to clients based on their interests and personalities. "More and more people see what we do and know we do creative things, so they want us to come up with the idea."

Planning and setting the stage are the biggest challenges in rock the dress photography. Wildes undertakes "coordinating everything from the idea to the location to the props involved to the time of day," she says. "Some ideas I have are really out there, and you can only do them at certain times of the year."

Take grape stomping. The nearby vineyard hosts it only in August, and Wildes has yet to fulfill this fantasy session. She did fulfill another season-dependent shoot, photographing a couple in a sunflower maze in May. Wildes recently found a couple to take her up on an idea she's long wanted to do, rocking the dress on a roller coaster at Busch Gardens. "They love coasters, but they wouldn't have thought of it on their own," she says.

Roller coaster, grape stomping, sand trap on a golf course, food fight (as yet unrealized but a poll-topper on her Facebook page)

—seems like Wildes is up for any scenario, even one environment she doesn't prefer but many clients desire: water. People, let alone dresses, don't look so good soaked, Wildes feels, plus there are concerns about her equipment, and more important, the safety factor. Last year's drowning in Canada of a



newlywed whose water-soaked dress was caught up in the current was a wake-up call.

"My No. 1 consideration is that my client is safe at all times, and me too." For a rock the dress shoot in a swimming pool, for example, the bride never goes in over her head, and a couple in the surf under a pier never waded

deeper than her knees, and when they lay down, it was in water less than a foot deep. For that shoot, Wildes used a 200mm zoom lens to create greater depth of field.

Regardless of the verb—trash or rock—the dress need not be actually ruined. It could be a setting or a look the couple

wanted but couldn't work into the wedding day schedule. A florist in one session wore red boots and was featured with Valentine bouquets. A couple in Cincinnati wanted shots in a variety of their favorite locales, from an ice cream parlor to the Reds baseball stadium. A couple in Illinois last autumn wanted to do something fun, so Wildes found a pumpkin patch.

"When I'm on location, I try to find things I wouldn't be able to do around [Tampa,]" Wildes says. The clients have to trust you. "If I pick a location and they aren't comfortable with it, it's not a good situation for either of us." When Wildes comes across a setting that appeals to her, she shoots it and stores the photos for brainstorming with clients.

Wildes earned an industrial engineering degree at Purdue in 2002 and went to work for Abbott Laboratories. She wrote 30 training modules in different languages for the corporation's plants around the world. It was on a church mission in the Philippines when she became the group's photographer that her true vocation emerged, and she started photographing on her business trav-

els. She also picked up work at a studio in Chicago to learn the technical aspects of photography. "I got to be good at it pretty quickly because of my technical background." The studio, however, would not let her shoot weddings, which she most wanted to do. "I was at that age, 24 to 27, where everybody was getting married, and I love the story. It's photojournalism. And everyone is different, and all the colors and locations and details are different."

When her husband got a job in Tampa, she found a job there, too, but decided to start her own photography business on the side. She was able to quit her job one year and a day later and go into Carrie Wildes Photography full time. She applied such industrial engineering concepts as continuous process improvement to her business, and her staff grew to include two lead and three associate photographers, a studio manager, and a graphic designer.

She uses a Canon 5D Mark II exclusively, and a range of Canon EF lenses: 16-35mm, 24-70mm, 100mm, and 70-200mm in f/2.8, and a 24-105mm f/4. She uses off-



camera lighting with speed lights on stands both day and night to get different looks and dramatic photos. Video lights are sometimes used at night for side or backlighting. She uses her home studio setup for the occasional fashion shoot or corporate client.

For rock the dress assignments, though, she wants to shoot in a place that will challenge her creativity while being meaningful and memorable to the couple. "Instead of just a dress as a keepsake, you've got a memory as a keepsake." ■

See more of Carrie Wildes' work at carriewildes.com.

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