

‘Creative Differences’

Photographer’s images capture spirit of special needs kids

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Susan Segal is a successful commercial photographer whose creations have adorned advertisements and book covers worldwide.

Her classic portraits, especially with companion animals, are sought by Hollywood glitterati. Ad agencies clamor for her stock photo images.

So, how does she describe herself and her thriving career?

“I’m a mom first, then a professional photographer and businesswoman,” said Segal, relaxed in a brown velour blouse that mirrors her eyes. “My son, Mark, is 10 years old and is autistic. I’m chairperson of the Community Advisory Committee (CAC), which is made up of parents of kids in special education, teachers, psychologists and other professionals. Three years ago, I started attending a support group of parents with autistic children at ParentsCAN, which at the time was Matrix.”

Mark is a talented artist and his freehand cartoons festoon the kitchen in Segal’s bright southeast Napa home. High on a hill, views stretch across the valley, but her attention is on her son’s work.

“A few years ago I organized an art show, called ‘Creative Differences’ that featured the work of 10 special needs people, ages 6 to 40, from all ranges of the autism spectrum. Their work was amazing.”

One of Segal’s favorite photos is a black and white one of Mark at age 2, crouched over a gold microphone, which was used in advertisements for Chase Manhattan Investments. He is a beautiful child who a year later would receive his autism diagnosis.



Cartoons by Mark Segal decorate the kitchen of his Napa home, in this photograph taken by his mom, Susan, a professional photographer who took photos of special needs children for a calendar for ParentsCAN. Mark Segal, 10, is autistic. Photo by Susan Segal

“I recently photographed a calendar of special needs children for ParentsCAN and Mark is Mr. September,” said Segal with a smile, pointing to his photo on the cover.

That Segal maintains a professional work environment while caring for her son, being active in his school, donating to philanthropic causes and advocating for children with special needs is all the more remarkable because she is a single mother.

Her son's autistic diagnosis, at the age of 3, occurred the same year that her husband became ill and passed away.

"I faced Mark's diagnosis thanks to the services in Napa, the Napa Infant Preschool Program and a therapist who worked with Mark. It really was key to unlocking his abilities of comprehension. It takes a team to work together to get success. Teachers, aides and parents all need to work with each other."

Segal was born and raised in Los Angeles. Her father was a hobbyist photographer and she grew up around cameras.

"When I started, I thought I wanted to photograph concerts. A friend got me my first paid job, taking photos of Liberace at the Hilton Hotel in Las Vegas. I thought, 'yeah, I want to do this.' Then another friend told me about Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, a commercial art school. My parents were thrilled I wanted to continue my education."

Art Center College opened her eyes to the world of advertising and commercial photography.

"When I graduated, I stayed in L.A. taking actors' headshots and working on independent movies as a still photographer. I started doing more commercial photography with agencies and selling stock photos."

Segal's images were used in greeting cards and billboards, magazines and in the London Sunday Times. Her book, "A Pink Flamingo," published in 1989, featured such notables as John Waters and Devine, as well as the creator of the plastic pink flamingo lawn ornament, Don Featherstone.

"I had a cousin in Napa and 12 years ago, my husband and I visited and fell in love with the valley," said Segal. "We went back to Southern California and three weeks later the Northridge earthquake hit. We decided we didn't want to raise a family there, so we moved to Napa to start a family."

The advent of digital photography cut down her business travel.

"A lot of my work is outside of California, but now you can live anywhere and get jobs. I receive e-mails all the time from Japan and other countries for my images. With my son in fourth grade, it's difficult to travel for jobs, so the Internet, overnight shipping and so on make it much easier to work."

She's proud of her most recent accomplishment, the 2007 calendar of special needs children for ParentsCAN.

“I was honored to be asked to be a part of it,” said Segal. “It was a labor of love. Erica Conway-Wahle, the board vice president, came up with the idea and I asked Jeni Olsen, a friend and Art Center alum, to do the design; I donated time and expenses. I hadn’t done a big project like that in several years. The weather was not cooperative, so we had to take some of the photos in the studio. Working with kids is always a challenge.”

The images are happy and carefree, from sisters dressed in their finest on a couch to teens vamping it up for the camera.

“I hope people see that these kids look like neuro-typical kids and that they have the potential to do whatever they want in life. The calendar is called ‘Faces of Hope’ and pictures kids in everyday situations. I asked their parents what the children liked to do so that they’d be comfortable. I hope people get an insight into who they are and that they are as beautiful and unique as any other kids in this world.”

Does she have any advice for parents facing the bumpy road of a special needs child?

“Don’t be in denial,” stated Segal. “Have the child assessed professionally and go wherever you need to go. All the professionals say get therapy as early as possible. Join a support system. At the ParentsCAN autism meetings I realized that my situation is different than the people sitting next to me. Every child with autism acts differently, some have higher abilities than others and not one shoe fits all.

“The most important thing for me and for others in this situation is to take it one step at a time.”

Segal encourages parents and educators with special needs children and students to attend the CAC meetings held the fourth Thursday of the month at the Napa Valley County Board of Education building off Imola Avenue at 12:30 p.m.

The Faces of Hope calendar can be ordered for \$15 from ParentsCAN, 253-7444; www.ParentsCAN.org . Additional Susan Segal images can be viewed at www.susansegal.biz