

Photographer and Filmmaker, SolStock

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[Alwyn Gosford]: For someone who's not familiar with your work, what makes a SolStock image?

[Lesley Lister]: To me, it's keeping it real; making it believable. I think we've always produced good images, but our style was quite staged. Having Graham as a photographer has helped us to make things more natural and with more of a flow.

[Donna Spence]: I totally agree with that. What I would say is that we try and tell stories and capture emotions. Our style has changed because the fashion was totally different, it was commercial and clean and now it's raw and authentic. Getty Images were trailblazers with that whole idea, and it took quite a while to change our mindset from 'grey and white and bright' and now we're 'dark and grungy' and our compositions are more varied, more layered, and have a clear point of view. The images are more exciting and engaging and it's second nature to us now. It's just a completely different animal from when we started.

[AG]: Going back to the beginning, when was SolStock created and how did the other members join?

[LL]: It was created in September 2009 and the three of us had been talking for quite sometime before that, but it was Graham who really bent my arm to collaborate and join forces and then it just went from there. I think we were quite lucky because we all had our own businesses, so we weren't relying on it for an income. It's wonderful being in stock photography, but I think you have to invest quite a lot to begin with, and not just money, time as well and we didn't need to lean on SolStock immediately for an income, so I think that's what built us up to be the business that we are now.

[DS]: We're very lucky, we could live on our other income and then anything else was an investment in the future and I think it took the pressure off, so we could eat and pay the mortgage.

[LL]: It probably took us about nine years to really establish ourselves as a good stock photography business, and I do think having those different skill sets helped. Obviously, Graham's wealth of experience as a photographer and talent with lighting was a massive bonus for us. Donna, a photographer as well but also a great art director and stylist. I was just a hobby photographer, but I ran a business with a team and had access to lots of people so putting everyone together made a great team.

[DS]: She's got the contacts and basically was the glue that brought us all together and then we fed off each other and that's how it works. It's a good amalgamation of talents.

[AL]: So how many are there in the SolStock team right now?

[LL]: I'm going to say twelve including us three - a mix of full and part-time. We've created a lovely

environment. I think the reason it works is that we have such a range of people, not just in age but creativity and other things too, but we all share the same goal - we're all enthusiastic, we all want to succeed, and we all enjoy what we do. The people that we work with, the models, we want them to experience that enjoyment too and I think that's what comes across in the images and why they love working with us, we like people to share that feeling.

Inspiration comes from light, from characters, from our models, colors, emotions, from everywhere.

[AG]: Where do you go for inspiration for your shoots in terms of style, composition, color palette, that kind of thing?

[LL]: Donna has shares in the local newsagents for all the magazines that she gets! We follow current trends, we watch the news to see things that are current, but we also shoot things that we think will make nice stories and that we will be able to create beautiful images from that customers will enjoy and buy.

[DS]: Absolutely in agreement. Inspiration comes from light, from characters, from our models, colors, emotions, from everywhere.

[AG]: How much imagery do you produce in an average month?

[LL]: We upload about 1,500 to 2,000 images a month generally.

[DS]: Normally we're doing about two shoots a week but at the moment, because of COVID, it's lots of little shoots. We're coming down from one day shoots to doing just five or six hours in a day because we're working outside and it's just changed the dynamic as we're a bit limited with what we can do.

[AG]: That's still a lot of imagery to deal with, how do you organize your postproduction process?

[LL]: When the photographers and videographers go out, they come back with thousands and thousands of images and Gayle and Mickaela will edit the selects on everything. Then we'll have a team color correct and retouch them, upload onto ESP and finally keyword them. So, it's a massive group effort. The thing for us is we try to ensure that at least two or three members can do a specific job, so we work as a team because it's easy to get tunnel vision and forget something important.

We've been photographing models with disabilities for quite a few years now and when we take on a shoot like that it's quite different than our typical shoots.

[AG]: Do you think being predominantly women-led has made a difference to how SolStock operates and the imagery that it produces? Do you think that it has had any actual advantages?

[LL]: I wouldn't say we've had any advantages, but I think we're more organized and I think we're more driven because the guys on staff are very 'yeah, that's fine' and Donna will be 'just one more time, just one more time' - so I think we maybe go the extra mile.

We're probably more communicative too, so when we talk to our talent, we find out more about them

and then that might lead to something else. For instance, we were shooting in an aesthetic clinic and talking with the model. We found out that she has a lovely villa in Cyprus with connections to loads of people which led to another shoot. It is about getting to know them and becoming friends, more than just you know, that stock photography business booking me as a model, it's actually Graham and Donna and Lesley and we have become very familiar with them.

[AG]: As well as submitting to the general collection you've also contributed to a number of special projects, including the Disability Collection, tell us about your experience with producing images for that, is there anything that stands out?

[LL]: I've always been involved in different charities, as has Donna, and I think that we are quite a caring team. That led to us going on a trip to Kerala in India where we photographed a group of people who are blind on a trekking holiday. I was going on it and then Donna agreed for Gayle to come along with me, and we got some lovely, lovely stuff. I was so nervous about going because I had never been around anybody who was blind, so it was a massive thing for me to do but everyone was amazing and it was their strength and motivation that really stood out for me and made it special.

[DS]: We've been photographing models with disabilities for quite a few years now and when we take on a shoot like that it's quite different than our typical shoots. In fact, there might be certain requirements that have to be fulfilled and you certainly can't direct the shoots or take the lead. For example, we shoot Evan a lot, he doesn't like loud noises and he has to wear headphones, so we have to be very aware of that. But at the end of the day, I hope the disability is just seen as incidental - you're taking lifestyle pictures about a boy who just happens to have Down syndrome. He still rides a bike, he still loves his dog, but you have to go in softer and you've just gotta go with the flow.

[AG]: You are involved with the Female Focus (#BeTheRoleModel) project in which we've partnered with Nat West Bank on. What was it like meeting and photographing other women entrepreneurs?

[DS]: It was quite intimidating, but it was totally exciting. It was lovely meeting these strong women who were truly passionate about what they did and were very talented. Seeing them in their work environments and how they juggle their lives and all it entails - it was really joyous.

[AG]: And you also tackle Custom Content requests, what's it like shooting with a specific client in mind and any tips for success you'd pass on to anyone thinking about shooting Custom Content for the first time.

[LL]: For me, I think the biggest one would be to read the brief thoroughly. And then to read it again. And again. My second biggest tip would be not to get carried away because we always get carried away on our shoots and me with my business head on looking at the revenue side of things, I think that to make them work you need to give yourself an hour at the end to change clothes and location so that you've got a little something that is completely different just for yourself.

[AG]: You've been incorporating video into your shoots, how is that going for you?

[LL]: I think it was quite a natural stepping stone for us as Graham and the guys had bits of experience dabbling in video and one of our mentors said 'you need to be doing video,' and she predicted its growth, which has obviously happened, and we put it off for a while because we didn't know much about it and it's a bit intimidating but we knew we just had to knuckle down and learn.

[DS]: Graham, Gayle, Alex and Jay are really creative and I think we're all learning together, plus the video education run by Getty Images has been priceless. It didn't feel like I was doing it in the dark. You've held our hand through it and from that you start pulling bits into your arsenal of skills and then you do it with a bit more confidence and it shows, and you improve a bit more from there, so it's definitely been a learning curve.

[AG]: I know that 2020 has been a challenge on many fronts, but do you have a favorite shoot from the year and why?

[LL]: I think it would have to be Cornwall. Graham had found this beautiful little house there and it was idyllic but obviously, we got hit with the first lockdown, so probably not a good idea to go, but then it was relaxed, and we had models already set for six months, and we just thought let's do it if we can. Obviously, we were really sensible and followed all the safety guidelines and we were really good trying not to touch the models and things like that, but that was my favorite because it was a little bit of normality after the first lockdown and it was a really beautiful area.

[DS]: It was a good laugh and I had friends there who were models as well and the people we hired the house from were great and very accommodating. It was just a win-win for everyone, and as Lesley said it was a bit of normality with a mini holiday, it was great.

[LL]: I think the other one for me would be that Zoom one we did very, very quickly because it's been one of our best. We were doing many daily Zoom calls, just because I like to keep a check on the team, making sure they're at their desk and not still in bed! The boys really hated it and then suddenly I was like 'oh my, why don't we just set the camera up behind you Alex while we do the Zoom?' And that shot has actually sold incredibly well.

[AG]: So once COVID restrictions are lifted, what shoot would be on the top of your list?

[DS]: One with lots of dancing and live music and a fire pit!

[LL]: I do like that but mine would be somewhere in the sun and away with everyone having a great time, because we do like to do team bonding, it just lifts everybody's spirits and is great for morale and everybody gets involved and it's just nice and we're selling pictures afterwards so really it doesn't cost that much.

[AG]: Count me in to help art direct that one!