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ashley brokop captures the moment

By MARY DOLAN

Photography by CHRIS MOORE

Ashley Brokop gets invited to a lot of weddings. Twenty-seven this year to be exact.

Ashley is a breakout wedding photographer with a flair for capturing the moment and a distaste for the humdrum plastic poses of the past.

Ashley, 30, is married to the love of her life, Billy,

and is mother to three-year-old Wesley and 21-month-old Betsy. She's always been drawn to the camera. But she's quick to tell you that though she's been shooting photography for 15 years, she's only been shooting well for the last four.

She's perky, she's bubbly, she's frank, and she takes pictures other photographers might not: pictures of the feet of bridesmaids under a bathroom stall in matching gold shoes, wedding parties leaping into ▶

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ABOVE, OPPOSITE PAGE: A sample of Brokop's work. CENTER: Brokop works in her office.

the air with childhood abandon and brides in stark white dresses in a muddy field.

Her work is less about the bridal "must have" shots and more about the "this really happened" shots. She provides brides with a storybook of photos of how their day unfolded. She captures bridesmaids helping a nervous bride wriggle into a dress that's intended to fit like a glove. She catches yawns and grimaces and wrinkled up noses. She clicks the button just in time to snap the candid hugs, pep talks and tears.

"I just wanted their story to be known," Ashley says.

Ashley has only been in the highly competitive world of wedding photography for about two years, but she's already making a name for herself. As the paradigm of wedding photography has shifted from one that once said it was only permissible to show brides looking prim, proper and poised to one that says it's ok to show what happens in between the prim and the proper and the poised, Ashley positioned herself to capitalize.

"It wasn't about natural moments, everything was posed," Ashley says.

She draws on experience shooting for the United States Air Force to deliver her honest portrayal of events. In the Air Force, Ashley spent time in the war-torn Middle East – in Iraq, Afghanistan and

Kyrgyzstan. While other members of the military shot with their guns, Ashley shot with her camera. She photographed American soldiers dressed head to toe in military regalia. She photographed them toting weapons they would never walk down the street with back home. She photographed controversial Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein's capture. And, in the midst of shooting, she met her husband.

She married, but without much pomp and circumstance. And once the two of them found a way the military would allow them to be in the same place – Shaw Air Force Base – they settled in Sumter, S.C.

Calling on past experience shooting weddings – in Las Vegas! – Ashley decided it was the perfect time to escape the death and destruction of war and focus on what she says are among the happiest events in people's lives: weddings.

The pint-sized photographer with a blonde bob and a diamond stud in the side of her nose defies the stereotypes. She doesn't dress in stiff suits and instead of being standoffish, she befriends her brides.

She tries to bond with each woman who hires her, saying it's important to know them to be able to truly capture their spirit. She shoots each wedding envisioning it's her own all over again.

"I love weddings, I love women, I love doing this," she says.