

Starting Over

Michealle Vanderpool Looks Back on Her Own Reinvention

Walking through the airport concourse, I am once again on my way to work in a new city. I feel numb from the neck down and reality is suddenly taken from me. Flashbacks of each city I have worked in, changing with every step I take. All the emotions and the confusion of sorting out my goals hit me at once. What will I do this time? The anxiety of making cold calls and the stress that comes with it surges through my body at the thought of starting over. I wonder why I never get used to these feelings since starting over in new places comes with the job of being a freelance hair and makeup artist.

When I was nine, I won an art scholarship. I loved sculpture and mediums with texture. But by age 15, my interest turned to what happens behind a camera and I began testing with photographers to build a book. Working as part of a team, I learned to understand lighting and different films and how they can create or destroy the mood of a project. Throughout this experimentation, I went to cosmetology school and focused on hair color and styling. Iowa School of Beauty had excellent teachers and a requirement of 2100 hours. This meant reciprocity with all major cities. I would be able to work anywhere.

Fresh out of school and with some pictures in my book, I picked a warm spot in the U.S. and moved. Miami was an easy choice. I had always planned to move, though I was not sure where before school. I had been saving everything I could for the move to make it as easy as possible for my living expenses.

The early '80s were an unorganized time in Miami. I could not seem to find my niche. I wanted to produce beautiful pictures that moved people's soul. What I found were newspaper classifieds that looked legit, but led me to men who brazenly offered me a job if I would comply with the casting couch.

I had trouble finding any direction in my work. I couldn't get focused. The frustration part was that I couldn't find help to sort out where to start first. There was no one around to screen the people. I had a small book but there were no agencies in Miami at the time – only modeling agencies that didn't seem to understand the need for representation of hair and makeup artists. I knew there was an industry, I had to find it. Eventually I decided to move again. This time I chose Montreal. It was the summer of '84.

I gave into the winters and stayed because of people like Daniel Perez at Cloutier, a leading hair and makeup agency. I believed in his vision and philosophy. I liked his passion and the way he developed artists. He gave me a tough reality check and the focus I needed to buckle down and do the work. His words were like a body slam to the floor! "You don't speak French" and "Your book looks American. How am I going to represent you?" he protested. But he liked my boldness – an American wanting to work in a French market.

I was so determined to be a part of Cloutier that I picked myself up and tested for about a year until speaking French even my mother couldn't understand my accent. My thought

patterns had changed. Everything about the structure of the French language makes you look at things a new way. I fell in love with the European vision and way of life. It forced me out of old habits. For me it felt right and comfortable. Though I rarely have occasion to use it these days, I still dream in French.

I was with Cloutier through the '80s. First exclusively and then during my bi-coastal days of living part time in Montreal and part time in Florida. We were a great team [Cloutier and I]. Daniel's philosophy, "Art first, then money." Angie was a great booker. We talked several times a day to find out whom the other had spoken to, the scheduled time for the next go-see and to follow up. It was the way successful people worked – at Cloutier.

Back then, you couldn't go to a bookstore as you can today and pick up a book like *The Hair, Makeup and Styling Career Guide*, which can make starting out much easier. You really had to figure out the puzzle yourself. Through cold calls and persistent knocking on doors, I eventually found the photographers that I liked and focused on creating unique styles with each of them.

Miami's South Beach area became profitable once again in 1986 when the European market moved in. I began to long for warm winters. I reevaluated my goals and decided to try [Miami] again. This time I could get help. I heard about a hair and makeup division at Michelle Pommier (formerly for models only) and sent my book. My thoughts took me to the beach everyday and the prospect of doing European catalogues. Their hair and makeup division was strong and they believed in my book. I was with Michelle for four winter seasons and I was busy.

The market was growing and changing dramatically. This caused me to reassess my short-term goals on the types of projects on which I wanted to work. I decided to make the move to Irene Marie. I needed more editorials in my book. Catalogue work paid the bills and lots of them, but my book was suffering. I missed the opportunity to create. At Irene Marie, we set a goal to rebuild my book with an editorial edge and stuck with it. I could not have asked for nicer people to work with or more beautiful projects to work on. German Vogue, Turkish Cosmo, Italian Mossimo and Fashion Quarterly of New Zealand are some of the publications for which I did my best work. The models were some of the most beautiful people in the world. Through the late '80s and early '90s, I was working in Miami during the winters and Montreal, Toronto and New York in the summer.

In 1993, my parents were both stricken with cancer. I packed up my homes in Florida and Montreal and moved back to my hometown in Iowa to be near them. It was overwhelming but I never questioned my decision. The challenge of working in a smaller market is why the industry usually chooses to budget flying in a hair and makeup artist to these locations.

I set my sights on developing a relationship with the Iowa film office. They didn't know that they needed good hair and makeup. I showed them examples of my work and it gave them ideas of the quality and kind of work that could be done locally. I took it upon myself

to show them the possibilities. Once I did that, it was easy to create work for myself. I gave them options and a reason to hire me. When they asked, "Can you age someone 40 years?" my answer was sure, do you remember to Noel Coward project in my book! I was kept busy with political, industrial and commercial work. After creating work in Iowa, I knew I could work anywhere.

Today I live in Nashville, Tennessee. The city affords me the same quality of work I enjoyed in Montreal and Florida. I work for the creative teams at record labels developing the images their artists will carry through their CD packaging and into public appearances. When I am not working on location, I am based out of Rodeo Drive Salon in Brentwood, Tennessee. They have allowed me to develop and maintain my interest in staying on the cutting edge of hair coloring. L'Oreal Professional has aided me in advanced technology by consistently sending me test products from Paris, which I have used in period films such as *October Sky* and PAX TV's pilot *Sullivan Sisters*.

In this business, it still touches me when I see how our art can affect someone else's direction in life. When I was a hair stylist in a salon in Iowa I had an opportunity to cut the hair of a little boy who came into the shop with his dad. He was adorable with his red hair and freckles, but he was as sad as he could be. He kept saying he wanted a cut like his dad. I thought that was what I had given him. But on closer examination of an old army photo from his dad's wallet we realized that the little boy wanted to look like *that* picture of his dad.

Both his father and I were miffed but his dad soon gave in and I cut the little boy's hair in the buzz cut his father had worn a dozen years before. That haircut and how that little boy perceived it transformed him into a confident, straight "A" student who never again had to be asked to help his mom around the house or do his chores. I saw the changes in that little boy's spirit and it changed me. It made me aware that I can make a difference. You only have to hear about the woman from the homeless shelter who is transformed by a hairdo and a new set of clothes to realize that we can give back to people.

I guess that is why I have a strong drive to constantly reinvent my work and myself, always looking for that spark of beauty that moves within people whether it is in film, TV or print. I know that one person can make a difference and so I try everyday.