

>>> Shelly Saunders, Bozeman, Montana

SHELLY SAUNDERS OPENED HER PHOTO studio in 1995, in her garage. “It was cold in there,” the Bozeman, Montana native recalls. “I had no heat.” She advised clients coming in for portrait or studio work to wear warm clothes. “I’d make them take off their coats for a few minutes to do the portrait, then they’d put them back on to stay warm.”

Saunders has come a long way in 10 years. Now specializing in architectural photography, she shoots for architects, interior designers, builders and home-products vendors statewide. Her photographs are used for portfolios, brochures and advertisements, as well as in magazine layouts.

Saunders got the photo bug early. At 14, flush with her first paycheck from her first job, she bought a camera and taught herself to use it. “I spent the rest of my paychecks on film and processing,” she says. After high school, she studied art, advertising and photography at a community college in San Diego, California, where she discovered she enjoyed shooting buildings and environments almost more than she enjoyed portraiture. Armed with a portfolio, Saunders returned to Bozeman in 1990, where she cold-called a local architect and spent the summer shooting his projects. More education, though, seemed like a good idea, so Saunders spent four years at Montana State University, where she earned her bachelor’s degree in photography.

Below: Moonrise over a Bozeman residence.



“When I first opened my studio, I did everything,” she remembers. “This is a small town. I shot everything, from

portraits to toilet products.” Eventually, though, her focus narrowed and the architectural focus came into play. “Architecture is compelling to me,” Saunders says. “I enjoy spending time alone in a building, exploring its forms and emotions.”

Even though she works without an assistant (“my chiropractor keeps telling me to get a ‘roadie’ to help with the equipment”), Saunders doesn’t spend all of her time alone with a building or interior. She meets with the client, walks the project and does a “preshoot,” in which she snaps proposed angles and does lighting suggestions for each space. “I basically give my clients a storyboard of images,” she says. “I e-mail thumbnail images to the architects and designers, so that they have a clear idea of what I propose to do. They can also tell me what’s important to them before we do the job.”

Saunders also scrutinizes the light in each project, wanting to be on site at the correct time when the morning light might stream through a bedroom or the sunset





is just so behind a building. “I like a natural look when it comes to lighting,” Saunders says, “but I always bring in lighting. I think you need to see the scenery if you’re shooting a room with windows and views. For that, you need to balance the light. Also, Saunders notes, she tends to shoot many rustic log homes, darker settings where lighting is a must.

Though Saunders studied all the traditional photography methods in school, she has jumped into the digital age wholeheartedly. “When I was being taught photography, I did my own processing and my own



printing. I was in control,” she says. But when she turned pro, Bozeman’s small size necessitated her sending film out of state for processing. “It was fine, but I didn’t have much control,” she says. Saunders mothballed her 4x5 equipment and soaked up knowledge on digital photography by reading and attending workshops. “Even though digital has some limitations, I was sold on its precise control,” she says.

Saunders’ photographs have a natural look, devoid of over-lighting. She credits her success to patience when it comes to getting the right shot. “I’d rather wait to get what I’ve pre-visualized,” she says. “I’ll come back time and again until the look is right.”

And her garage? “Oh, I’m still in the same garage,” Saunders says with a laugh, “but it’s been upgraded. It doesn’t look like a garage anymore—and I have heat.” ■
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Clockwise from above: A soaring fireplace marks the living room of a house designed by Bozeman architect Jim Meissner and built by JDL Construction. A doorway into a cabin at Wilderness Edge Retreat in Ennis, Montana. A master suite with interiors by Design Works and architecture by Steve Locati of Bozeman.