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William and Tricia Creasey



The 13-year-old sister



The 5-year-old twin daughters

“ I really like incorporating **photography** into my room designs because it not only personalizes the room, but it captures the most natural things—a **smile, a laugh, a touch, a kiss.** ”

Extreme MAKEOVER

By Tamara Lackey

Since its inception six years ago, *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* has been a prime-time network success, consistently pulling in tens of millions of viewers and winning two Emmy Awards along the way. It's a show that works because it wears its heart on its sleeve and brings viewers along for the experience, many of whom well up at each and every episode.

The basic premise of the show is this: a family needs a new home, usually because they are battling arduous odds in their lives. These families are suffering and are worn down from experiencing natural disasters, personal tragedies or life-threatening illnesses. They are often trying to rebuild after an incredible loss, but are running out of hope as they combat an increasingly troubling living situation.

The family in question, or someone on their behalf, submits a request to ABC to be considered for the show, and if chosen, said family is awarded a brand new home that will be delivered, in full, only one week later.

The same day that the family is told they have miraculously won, via bullhorn, is the same day the actual building of the new home begins. It is also on this day that a small city of sorts is built around the existing house—namely, a set that includes a bevy of mobile trailers and a massive security detail assigned to protect not only the secrets behind the unveiling of the new home (The Reveal), but also the well known cast.

The other thing that happens on the first day is that a professional photographer is invited to photograph the family. Regardless of weather, lighting or time of day, the shoot begins on Door Knock Day—the day the family learns they've won—and the start time can be pushed back depending on the pace of the morning. And it goes without saying that there is little or no option for location choices, as it's vital to keep the family on set for all filming and media requirements.

As a photographer on the set of a reality television show, it's sometimes tough to build momentum. If you're



Volunteers pitch in to help the design team hang the framed pieces in the master bedroom.

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Going through image selection for the master bedroom wall layout.

two minutes into a fabulous shoot and Mom needs to jump out for a press conference, the session is finished. If the light is dropping fast, and you've finally gathered the whole family together for that treasured group portrait, but the director suddenly decides to re-shoot a scene, the session is finished. If it's pouring rain, and your 5-year-old subject is shivering under a dilapidated awning hanging from a house that's about to be demolished, you must simply do your best to keep her attention focused on the interaction with you—not on the huge camera crane behind you, or on the few thousand spectators roped off behind that, or on the burgeoning press crew buzzing around the periphery. And here's the thing: Even if you manage to overcome the external distractions, you are dealing with a child facing an extreme situation. Additionally, you are, in the end, working with the emotional chaos pounding through the blood of every member of her family on that absolutely surreal day.

So, why bother with the portrait shoots at all? Because the family was promised a home. Not just a house but, truly, a ready-made home. And that inevitably means images of loved ones throughout.

Host Ty Pennington says, "I really like incorporating photography into my room designs because it not only personalizes the room, but it captures the most natural things—a smile, a laugh, a touch, a kiss."

And it's a critical link between the family's old life and their new one. Rex Ballard, the principal cinematographer on the show, comments, "It's so important to bring out the essence of the family in the photographs. That day is big. They're getting this huge surprise, the ultimate dream, and the photographer needs to capture that energy. Those photographs are the connection between the family and their brand new home."

A photographer's experience on the show can vary from a quick shoot with everyone together at once to an all-day session that happens in short bursts around the ongoing action. When I photographed the Creasey family in Lexington, NC, I started shooting in the pouring rain at 11:30 a.m. and finished in the pitch dark and freezing cold somewhere close to 6 p.m. I met the family right away: two 5-year-old twins, a 13-year-old sister, a 40-year-old dad trying to rein everyone in, and a 37-year-old mom—a mom who not only takes care of her children, but also assumes many other roles, such as that of a dedicated teacher, a writer of a children's book, a chemotherapy patient experiencing stage-four terminal cancer and a wife and partner to her husband.

As an outsider to the show, you might think you'd be dealing with some pretty inflated egos on set on the part of the





Host Ty Pennington and singer/songwriter Jewel burn wood to achieve an antique look to custom-built frames.

cast. But the reality is the exact opposite. As Ty explains, "We are constantly humbled by the families we meet, the courage they show and the experiences they live through." The show is so touching because the hardships these families endure can be brutal—physically taxing and emotionally wrought. Ty has even joked about getting tear duct surgery just so he would stop crying so often on camera.

Although the experience differs from photographer to photographer and episode to episode, after my most recent shoot I spent several hours meeting with a couple of designers and, later, a design producer to make image selections. In the end, we ordered 56 individual images in a variety of sizes. I edited the images that night, until around 2 a.m.; sorted them into color, black-and-white and lightly cross-processed images, then set them up for sizing, ranging from 5x7 to 30x80. I uploaded the order to Buckeye Color Lab the next morning, and they printed, mounted and shipped the images to the show—donating nearly \$2000 worth of prints—by early afternoon.

The next day I met with Ty again to go through various layouts of the images, as the wall display would be the centerpiece of the room, and then followed-up with the design producer to make sure all the images would be aligned correctly with the custom-built frames. It's an intensive timeline. And yes, they really do build that house in seven days. Still, a



Thousands of spectators wait hours to be able to cheer on the return of the family.

Just before the family arrives for the big Reveal, the Extreme cast and crew huddle up to offer special thanks to individuals who worked particularly hard on making the episode come together.



significant attention to detail remains.

A few days later, I returned to the set, first and foremost to help them find the framed pieces (they'd been misplaced in the monumental move), but also to re-sort them (some frames were still being made, hours before The Reveal) and later, to assist in their hanging.

Where did all of my images go? Pretty much everywhere: tucked into frames, fitted into scrapbooks, pinned on creatively-designed boards, blown up into huge portraits, framed as sets of three, placed behind window panels used as wall art. Basically, they wound up in nearly every room and hallway throughout the new home.

And as it all comes together, and they are just about to bring the family in, you can really sense how the natural feel of the family photographs personalizes the new home. Ty sums it up best: "Photography can bring nature into a room: images of Mother Nature, yes, but sometimes, more intimately, images of human nature. And there's nothing better to give a room than life. That's when it really becomes a living room."



Tamara Lackey is the author of The Art of Children's Portrait Photography (Amherst Media) and has just released her first full-feature educational video, Inside Contemporary Children's Photography (available now on DVD). At the 2010 WPPi Convention she was a platform speaker and panel judge for the 16x20 Print Competition.



The mad rush to move in all the furniture and place everything according to room designs.