

One thing I learned about being a school photographer is that they need the patience of Job, the wisdom of Solomon, and the personality of 'Weird Al' Yankovic. My stint in this environment came long before there was a thing called "Funny or Die," but the concept was applicable. You haven't lived until you have been faced with a lineup of fourth graders eagerly waiting to see what cute, clever, or cringe-inducing name you were going to call them as they plopped themselves down in front of the camera. Abe's reputation preceded him in this arena, and we were all expected to be versed in the custom. He had such gems as "Paula Pickles" and "Tina Twinkle-toes" to his credit, and I recall even once a teacher sat down for me and announced that her class just couldn't wait to see what I would come up with to call her. Talk about a deer in the headlight's moment. What I would have really liked to call her, I couldn't.

On the subject of things you can and cannot say on the job, it goes without saying that no one would ever use inappropriate language and throw a tantrum while working with students and teachers. Except that one time I did. I was working with a class of unruly middle-school students one day and had an epic meltdown that would have made Clark W. Griswold's blood run cold on his worst vacation day. I have written about that episode in another book, and I am not going to repeat it here. Suffice it to say it was like if Howard Stern shouted down Ozzy Osbourne at an Alice Cooper concert.

Every school runs its picture day a little differently. Sometimes, you have help from the staff or students; other times, you are completely on your own. Some schools would provide lunch to the photographers in the cafeteria or at least let them purchase it there. Other schools think, "Why would a photographer need to stop for lunch? They have 400 smiling faces to photograph by the end of the day; best get after it." Sometimes, we would be lucky enough to squeeze in enough time off to grab a bite, but as often as not, we did well to find a vending machine where we could grab a bag of chips, a candy bar, and a Coke. That is what I came to call lunch for people who don't have time for fast food. The end of the day isn't a lot better sometimes. I was often scheduled for another school a couple of hundred miles down the road the next day, so once I packed up the car and gassed up, I would get a couple of hot dogs and a family-size bag of Doritos (servings per container: 1) and hit the trail. I easily gained 40 pounds in the time I worked there, and it was a constant struggle to get back to the weight I was when I started the job. Unfortunately, there has only been one time since then that I even came close.

Many of the bigger school organizations, such as our local PTA, which held considerable power over who was awarded school picture contracts, had the notion that there were two types of photographers that would run picture day – Abe and not Abe. This became a problem when Abe wanted to begin to step away from the day-to-day grind of the activity and concentrate on the business side of things. After all, this is why he trained all of us photographers, although there was a high degree of attrition in the staff from one year to the next.

Other schools were happy with whomever they could get to come and work with them. In most cases, I looked to the teachers and administrators as allies in the struggle to get through the crowd of students. That wasn't always happening. I started to notice certain teachers who clearly had an agenda. They were, as columnist George Will calls them, "political activists masquerading as teachers." I saw an example of this one fall in downtown Billings when a class of fourth graders marched down the street with signs and chants for the teacher's preferred candidate in the U.S. Senate race that year.