



## PICTURES OF A DREAM

AWARD-WINNING PHOTOGRAPHER  
THOMAS KELSEY'S NEW BOOK  
IS A LABOR OF LOVE

BY JO ANN LLOYD

PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING photographer Thomas Kelsey (B.S., Journalism, 1977) has been employed for more than three decades but hasn't worked a day in his life.

What he does is a labor of love.

As a photojournalist, he has photographed six U.S. presidents – from Gerald Ford to George W. Bush – and Pope John Paul II, twice. He shot four World Series, two Indianapolis 500s, Super Bowl XXI, and the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles.

As a fine art photographer, he has traveled to all 50 states, Mexico and New Zealand. "The Spirit of the West," his recently self-published book of stunning wildlife and spectacular landscapes, is the culmination of 30 years of work and realizes a dream he first had at Cal Poly.

Kelsey was photo editor of Mustang Daily and shot for the Five Cities Times Press Recorder and then-Telegram Tribune before he even graduated from Cal Poly.

He says Learn by Doing has been his life's motto. "If I had an opportunity, I jumped at it and did it," he said.

After stints at smaller newspapers, Kelsey landed a job as staff photographer at the Los Angeles Times in 1979. He spent 12 years capturing images both heart-warming and heart-wrenching – and award winning. He was part of a team that won a 1983 Pulitzer Prize for a series on Southern California's Latino community.

In 1992 The Rocky Mountain News in Denver wooed base-

ball-lover Kelsey with the opportunity to document Colorado acquiring a new Major League Baseball team. A stint at the Riverside Press-Enterprise followed, then an invitation to join the Outdoor Channel. All was well until new owners let go of the channel's entire creative team in 2007.

"It was a big shock," Kelsey said. "It was the first time in 30 years I was out of work."

But it turned out to be a blessing, giving Kelsey time to finally put together "The Spirit of the West," showcasing the American West and its diverse landscapes and dazzling wildlife.

Kelsey traces his love of the back country to summers as a boy in Yosemite, Yellowstone and Grand Canyon, where he father worked as a seasonal ranger.

"There is something about the serenity and tranquility of the wilderness where no one talks back to you except the trees," Kelsey said. "Traveling to wilderness areas and photographing wildlife is my therapy."

Both sides of Kelsey's career have presented unique opportunities. A few years out of Cal Poly, he participated in what would be Ansel Adams' final photography workshop in Yosemite Valley. The weeklong workshop attracted 75 eager students and world-renowned photographers to teach and critique. "It was an incredible, life-changing experience," Kelsey said. "I realized while studying under Mr. Adams that great photography could change the way people think about the environment.

When President Gerald Ford hung one of Ansel Adams' powerful black-and-white prints in the Oval Office in 1976, people started recognizing photography more as an art form. That really had a big effect on me and how I've lived my life."

More recently, Kelsey spotted an online posting from the Greatest Generation Foundation for a photographer to travel to Europe to document the 65th anniversary of the Battle of the Bulge. The ad stipulated that the photographer must have strong historical ties to the battle.

"My dad fought in Europe and earned a purple heart at the Battle of the Ruhr Pocket in Germany in 1945," Kelsey said. "I wrote a passionate letter to the foundation and received a call that night. They were taking seven World War II veterans, aged 82-91, to various sites in Europe in December of 2009. The vets were to meet some of their German counterparts. More than 1,400 photographers applied for the job. I was thrilled to get it.

"Everything I had ever done in my life prepared me for that trip. It was highly emotional. My dad had died a few years before, and I felt I was going for my dad, to give him closure.

"I have been blessed," Kelsey said. "I love meeting people. I love being a photographer."

Thomas Kelsey now lives in Goleta and shoots for the Santa Barbara News-Press. His work can be seen at [www.thomaskelsey.com](http://www.thomaskelsey.com).