

Another first for Thin Line: Al Key becomes photo director

By Alex Helm written for *Denton Live Magazine* Spring-Summer 2018

More than anything else, photographer Al Key loves shooting lightning. And he would do anything to get a good shot, even if it means being struck by lightning.

Back in the early 1980s, around midnight somewhere between Watauga and Haslet, Key was sitting in the back of his truck trying to get that perfect shot. The next thing he knew, he was lying on the ground, his face pressed against the edge of the driver's side tire. Something was pelting his leg. It was hail.

He looked up and saw a wall cloud coming right at him. Rousing himself out of his shock, he grabbed his tripod, chucking it in the back of his truck before speeding down the road.

But as he was driving, he started itching all over. The copper brads on his jeans and the steel eyelets on his Adidas had become superheated by the lightning, burning his skin. He got back out of the truck, kicked his shoes and pants off and saw marks where the metal had burned his skin. He even has Lichtenburg marks - faded lines shaped like lightning - across his back where the lightning passed over his body.

For anyone else, this might have been the end of their lightning photographer career. But not Al.

"I figured if I could survive that, then I could make it," he says.

Al still shoots storms to this day, along with the kind of nature that you can only find here in North Texas. His photos of lightning are some of what lined the walls in a display from last year's Thin Line Festival photo entries, along with about 60 other photos from local high schools, colleges and universities. Veins of electricity shoot across the sky, striking buildings and reaching spindly limbs through ominous black clouds.

This year, Al is the new photo director for the 11th-annual Thin Line. Photography is one of the arts on display at the festival. Al's been associated with the annual event for years: one of his photos - lightning reflecting in a dirt road puddle - won the grand prize at Thin Line two years ago. In 2016, he became a judge, and this year he's the one curating the photos and getting them ready for display.

Al has been in the photo business for some time. Forty-seven years, in fact. He got his first camera when he was just 14. His father was a University of North Texas (UNT)

meteorology professor and wrote meteorological textbooks, and the publishers needed photos to go along with textbook descriptions. Thus began Al's career as a storm chasing photographer.

"We were storm chasing before there was even a term for storm chasing," Al says. "We went out every spring chasing storms."

On days when the storm didn't happen, he found himself looking around the world at North Texas' unique environment. He started shooting the animals and birds and nature scenes in Denton, Collin, Cook and Wise counties. He'd even make his way up to Oklahoma sometimes.

Shooting locally is another reason why Al is looking forward to the festival. As a former photojournalist for the *Denton Record-Chronicle* (DRC) for almost 30 years, he's been able to create connections with people who love his photos. Whether it's readers, people interested in where he took certain photos, what kinds of birds are in them, or other photographers, Al's work has allowed him to be involved with the people who live here.

"I've been looking for a way that I can stay in touch with the community in Denton and the people who showed so much interest in the things I did at the DRC. I tried to offer some sort of pleasing alternative to the readers, and I got a lot of good people that backed me up and thought that was great."

With the Thin Line Festival, Al is hoping to continue making those connections. He was born here, went to Denton High, and then to UNT. His wife, son, and mother went to UNT. His father taught at UNT. And his work has been displayed all over Texas, even in the state capitol building.

His goal is to get people interested in Thin Line, and to encourage anyone to enter their work. He wants to make the contest accessible to all levels of photographers by creating entry categories that allow for people to feel as if they have stuff to enter. That's part of his strategy for keeping community connections.

"I think a lot of what I do is really attractive to people who like to do photography," Al says. "And I think they could be interested in being around other photographers who do that kind of thing and communicate with each other."

That's the end goal for Al. Making connections. Starting conversations. Keeping up with the amazing art the Denton community has to offer. For him, Thin Line makes that happen.