

Kathy Keatley Garvey, Bee Photographer: How She Captures the Moment

"If I had my way, I'd spend all the day with the bees."

Kathy Keatley Garvey

by M.E.A. McNeil

When the old UC Davis entomology truck exploded in a ball of fire, it was at the hand of photographer Kathy Keatley Garvey – just playing with an iPhone special effects app. The joke was to call attention to the need for a new vehicle in a grant request to the Farm Bureau. And yes, it did get their attention with a laugh.

Garvey's journalistic career has been about getting people's attention to her subjects, although she ducks the spotlight herself. Her tools are images, both written and photographic: she considers the two as a continuum: "Photography," she said, "is writing with light." Although she has photographed all manner of things, she is known for her photographs of insects, which she has taken in addition to her role as press person for the entomology department at Davis. If any are the most remarkable, they are her photographs of bees.

She honed her skills on film cameras, but ten years ago she began shooting digitally and has never returned to the darkroom. Although she owns some 20 cameras she says that equipment is no more than a small percentage of the formula. "When a person sees a photograph and asks the photographer 'What kind of camera do you have?' it's like tasting a meal and asking the chef what kind of pan he uses." Garvey developed her "it" over long years; she has some tips to share on acquiring an eye for bee photography.

She started as a child taking pictures on her family dairy farm on the Cowlitz River in southwest Washington State. She loved photographing family members and the animals there. Her father and grandfather kept bees, and she remembers her grandfather telling her "how amazing the bees are". The tradition could go back to an ancestor who arrived in 1740 from Ireland – another story in itself. A farmer, he built a round barn that is still standing near Castle Rock, Washington: "I suspect he kept bees because most farmers did then," and her Virginia relatives have been beekeepers for generations.

Garvey was editor of her high school newspaper and went on to major in communications and journalism in college. "I'm a 'true' photographer, in that I paid my dues," she said. "I learned to develop film while at Washington State University and served as a news editor and photo editor of the newspaper back when we processed film and made prints. It was laborious." It was there that she learned skills for composing a picture.

As editor of The Vacaville Reporter in Northern California, she worked 60 to 80 hours a week and was in charge of the staff of 13. The personal tragedy of her best friend's rape and murder became a deeply felt article that won the National Newspaper Association award for best feature story in the nation. Under her watch, the newspaper won numerous state and national awards, among them a dozen personal awards. Photography was a vocation and a passion; she had a darkroom in her home. She was chosen as Woman of the Year in Vacaville in 1974.

When her son was born in 1982, she gave up the frenetic pace of the newsroom for his early years "we had the best baby pictures ever – pre-digital." At age four she gave her son a Nikon camera. "People thought I was crazy." But she taught him to care for it and adjust the aperture and shutter speeds. As he went through Solano County 4H, she taught the children photography for a decade – showing them, she said, "how to see the world through a viewfinder" and print their own photos. Her son, as well as other members of the group, won national, state fair best-of-show and other photography awards. As he matured, she volunteered as a parent publicist for his school and youth symphony.

It was on a walk through the UC Davis arboretum in 1986 that she saw a posting for a campus position as a science writer. Among 200 applicants, she did not expect to get the job, but she was hired to work at the medical school magazine, The UC Davis Physician. She has since become the Davis Entomology Department Communications Specialist, doing writing, editing, photography, website content and news media relations. She works with researchers who study everything from mosquitoes, IPM and ants to, most fascinating to her, bees.

Garvey is a breast cancer survivor. She had been taking photos of creatures large and small for decades, but, recovering from surgery, she said "I sat in the yard and watched the insects – mostly honey bees." It must have been then that her fascination with the bees became a passion. Her subsequent catalog of bee photos is a respected, widely used resource.

Although she insists that her extraordinary results are "90% about looking through the viewfinder to capture the moment", she has chosen equipment with care. She uses two Nikon D 700 motor drive digital cameras.

Why two? She designates one for photographing insects so that it does not have to be cleaned when changing lenses. She says that a macro lens is necessary for photographing bees. Her bee camera has a 105 macro lens (explaining that Nikon calls macro “micro”) as well as extension tubes. With the other Nikon D 700, which she uses for all other kinds of photography, she uses a 60 macro lens as well as an assortment of about a dozen others such as telephoto and fisheye lenses. She keeps her iPhone in a pocket and has fun with its fisheye, macro and telephoto lenses – although she eschews games.

She prefers natural lighting when photographing bees. Sometimes she uses a ring for lighting an entire insect, but tends to use it at home because it is difficult to transport and set up. When she uses a flash, she bounces it -- that is, deflects it off a nearby object.

How can any photographer manage to capture the moment the way she can in her extraordinary bee photos? To start, her advice is to dress for success: “No black, no perfume or scented shampoo; wear light-colored clothing. Many photographers think foragers will sting, but they don't.” Then, she says, “Pull up a chair and observe.” Her counsel is to start as early in the morning as the bees start flying to capture the light, as well as the late afternoon. She removes the lens hood from the camera so that it doesn't disturb the bee. “The best place to focus when photographing a bee is on the eyes. It is fairly easy to photograph a bee on a flower, but very difficult to catch it in flight. A motor drive can take eight frames a second, which makes it possible to catch a bee in the air.” But there is more to it than craft: “You have got to have a passion for it. It takes patience and a strong interest in nature, insects and photography.”

Her library of images has been amassed on her own time, although she freely offers the use of her photos to researchers at Davis and beyond. She can often be seen on her lunch hour in the campus pollinator garden, the Häagen-Dazs Honey Bee Haven. Since 60 species of native bee have been identified in the garden by Emeritus Professor Robbin Thorp, Garvey takes care to identify both the bee and the plant it is on. “People in the department request photos for journals, magazines, newspapers, websites, and power points. They might ask, ‘Do you have a photo of a honey bee on a cherry blossom?’ Yes, and a bee on about every other fruit and vegetable flower, too.”

Her volume of images requires a system of naming and filing. She first loads the photos onto iPhoto on her Mac computer. It has a wide screen so that she can view numerous photos at the same time to make selections. She chooses photos to keep, names them and files them digitally in folders. Many are stored on Flickr, a normally free software sharing program, although she pays a fee because her cache of pictures is so large. She has reserved the rights to her photos and posts them online at low resolution.

Garvey gladly supplies higher resolution copies of her work to those who request appropriate use, which she defines as non-commercial and educational. She does not charge for such use and asks only attribution. Her Flickr site can be found at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/pho-tog/>.

Easy going and generous by nature, she finds the abuse of her largess to be frustrating; her photos are “lifted and used all over the internet,” she said. “One was used for a commercial logo. One was even copyrighted by someone in Iraq.” She said that photographers typically bill for such infractions, but she has not. “I don't mind people using the photos for education. I don't make money off them, so why can someone else?”

Four years ago, Garvey was asked to write a blog for the University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources website. Since then, she has not missed a regular weekday contribution to her Bug Squad Blog, which she composes evenings on her own time. It serves as a tool across a wide range of educational levels. When she posted a photo of legendary Davis entomologist Dr. Richard Bohart, “I got posts asking ‘What is entomology?’ so I used it to show what entomology is,” she said. “Many people don't know.” The blog is also a goldmine of sophisticated research material. Each entry usually has several paragraphs and deals with all manner of related subjects from fear of the Carpenter bee's loud buzz to informative displays at California Agriculture Day.

What makes Garvey's blog unique is the photos. From the Honey Bee Haven garden at Davis, her posted images that identify species of both bee and plant are a rare resource. The regular combination of skilled photo and informed text makes the Bug Squad Blog one of the top insect blogs in the country. It has gotten over 2.6 million hits from “scientists and just curious people around the world,” she said of its followers. It is carried not only by UCANR but by several Master Gardener sites in California. Find it at <http://ucanr.org/blogs/bugssquad/>. Her website at KathyGarvey.com links to the blog and will eventually be developed with photos.

Garvey's current goal is to use her photos to profit bee research. She and her family were major contributors to the pollinator garden at Davis, and they still donate plants. She would like to publish a book of bee photos, a calendar and note cards with the proceeds to benefit the science that is the subject of her fascination and celebration.

In any case, she next needs to get more external hard drives to take care of her internal drive to “keep taking pictures of bees.”

A recent blog posting, accompanied by a stunning photograph, conveys a sense of Garvey's spirit:

“Okay, I’ll admit it.

“I have a soft spot for honey bees.

“Today I fished out some thoroughly drenched honey bees from our swimming pool.

“Indeed, the pool looked like an Olympic meet for *Apis mellifera*.

“It appears that while the bees were foraging on the nearby cherry laurel blossoms, they tumbled into the pool. That’s when I saw them – struggling -- and netted them...

“I took a plastic spoon, dipped it into a jar of star thistle honey and offered it to them. They sipped it, gathered a quick burst of energy, and off they buzzed...

“Saving a few bees, one bee at a time, is a little like saving starfish on the beach.” Here she quotes a story of a man who, when told he could make no difference throwing a few stranded starfishes back into the ocean, replied, “It makes a difference to this one.” Garvey concludes with,

“Today the honey bees were starfish.”

As for our struggling bees, Garvey is making a difference, one blog, one photo at a time.

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This article is based on an interview on March 29, 2012, subsequent emails and the Bug Squad blog of April 6, 2012.