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Portrait of a Club Photographer

Napkin Nights' Tracy Lee takes her best shot

By [Xania Woodman](#)

I'm sitting on Tracy Lee's bedroom floor, playing with a tiny Siamese holy terror of a cat and a pen light. It's part office, part Zen den, but Martha's got nothing on this chick: "I sewed all that," she says, casually gesturing toward the bedspread. And the shams, the curtains and a mountain of accent pillows. The pattern looks familiar; I recognize it as the same she used to sew her own floor-length ball gown for the Las Vegas Prom. Clearly, sleep is not a priority with this woman.



Photo by Iris Dumuk

Before taking on the town, we started the interview at her home. I entered through the garage where she pointed out her rental car. The official Napkin Nights-mobile was totaled in an accident, a frightful reminder of how much traveling Tracy must do for work. I stepped gingerly over the white backdrop she uses for photo sessions and tried not to knock over the expensive camera and lights.

Tracy Lee is the principal owner of Napkin Nights, an online photo gallery that has become a household name among nightclub circles in Vegas, Sacramento and Phoenix. Despite having been out till late the night before, Lee will rise early and begin uploading the previous night's albums almost immediately. With three cities to care for, that means she may pass an entire day at the computer before getting dressed and doing it all over again. The site's cult-like status has people spending hours of precious time at work scanning the pages to find images of their drunk selves waving a martini about and trying to be as "money" as a Swingers movie poster.

Her athletic frame is bent intently over the computer; she's an avid My Spacer. Three massive computer monitors cluster together on one work space and a laptop just waits in the corner for the next big adventure. This is the seat of power, which she vacates temporarily to get ready. She chooses a pink tank with "Heiress" in rhinestones, jeans, a wide gold belt, and gold heels. I perch gingerly on her toilet seat and watch as she bounces back and forth from her curling iron to her computer, and back to the mirror to apply heavy Kohl eyeliner while we discuss her very short, very direct road to success.

Tracy Lee was born in Sacramento, California, where she started high school at the age of 12 and began college before even receiving her high-school diploma. While working with Earthlink she taught herself web design. Her affinity for photography was developed simultaneously but independently: "I've had a camera in my hand most of my life." After modeling for some time, and having become something of a fixture in Sacramento's nightlife scene, Lee got the idea to take photos inside the clubs. That was February 12, 2002. A friend suggested they form a website and NapkinNights.com launched February 15, only three days later. "When it came time to come up with a



name for the site, I tried to think of something that epitomized nightlife," she says "and what does that more than the napkins you write your number on at the end of the night?"

Lee made the move to Vegas two and a half years ago when Napkin Nights was proving to be a profitable venture. Lee had set a goal for herself to make Napkin Nights her only job and had already met that goal. This February, the site will celebrate its four-year anniversary, as well as the three-year anniversary of the Vegas launch in May. Vegas has proved to be the most profitable of her three cities but she still travels once a month to Phoenix and to Sacramento to check in on the clubs and her staff. Right now, between Las Vegas, Sacramento and Phoenix, Napkin Nights employs 24 women and two men. And Lee still does all the scheduling. But she now lets her partner back in Sacramento handle the web design. During the site's infancy, Lee was turned down by the professor of a Flash design class for not having taken the prerequisites. "Yeah, I kinda laugh about that now," she chuckles.

We do a purse check and head out the door. Business cards, batteries, flash attachment, ID, T-Mobile Sidekick, earpiece, cash, VIP cards, face powder, a voice recorder she never uses, gum ... There are two stops on Lee's itinerary tonight: first V Bar for Reinvented Wednesdays and then local industry night at Lure. Her roster used to be longer, a marathon tour of four or five venues at a clip. Fortunately, Tracy's staff has swelled to levels that leave her more time to be a business owner and less of a staff photographer.



Photo by Iris Dumuk

Inside V Bar, DJ Redneck Bob—a.k.a. Tao promoter Bob Shindelar—is behind the decks. Lee checks in with the door staff, the hostess, the promoter, and the liquor sponsor. Breaking up the steady stream of couples and group photos is some interplay with the DJ and a few creative shots of Johnny Love with all five flavors of his vodka. Lee still enjoys the artistic side of photography and now creates unique press shots for local DJs. "The colors show up richer with a flash," Tracy says to Jessica, the first photographer she hired in Vegas. "See?" She pulls a serious-looking piece of flash equipment from her purse and attaches it to Jessica's camera. Together they cost \$3,000. They pose for sample shots and we observe the difference.

"I see," I say, and sip thoughtfully on my passion-flavored vodka and Redbull. Tracy Lee does not drink alcohol; she hasn't for six years now. It's either pineapple or orange juice and 7-Up. That must be where she gets all the energy. "I feel guilty if I don't have anything to show for my day. ... I love being productive!" Next stop, Tracy? "World club domination."

Wrapping things up at Lure, she scrolls through her pictures. "We need more girl shots!" We make another turn around the lounge, dodging the hailing hands from tables that still need more attention and on the patio we find an encouraging scene. "But if we go up to this group the guys will jump in on it." We pass and continue the hunt. A Napkin Nights photographer moving briskly through the crowd will take an average of 75-100 shots per club. They touch her arm and tap her shoulder to bring her to them. They'll even go so far as to send a friend to fetch her. She also receives many requests to be in the photos and I soon find myself a part-time photographer.

Tracy Lee knows what people are going to do before they're even in her viewfinder's sights. Men are the most eager to make an ass of themselves, but women aren't that much more reserved. Funny how people will wait until there's a camera pointed at them to do—or wear—the oddest stuff. About three times per week she is asked to remove photos from the site. This is usually because the subject has been caught in a compromising situation with someone other than their significant other, and that makes Lee the court photographer for crimes of passion as well as fashion.

Web: <http://www.napkinnights.com/>

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