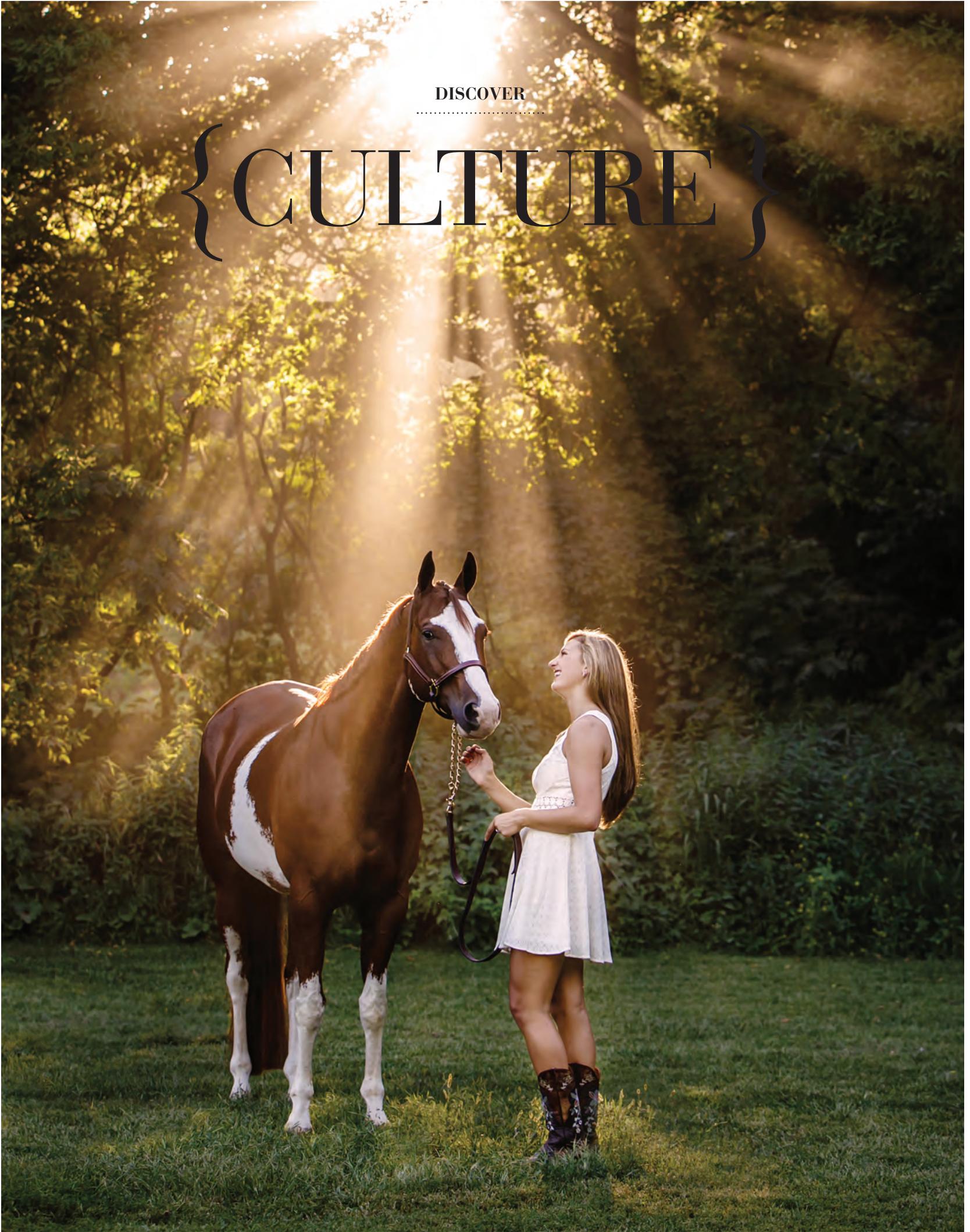
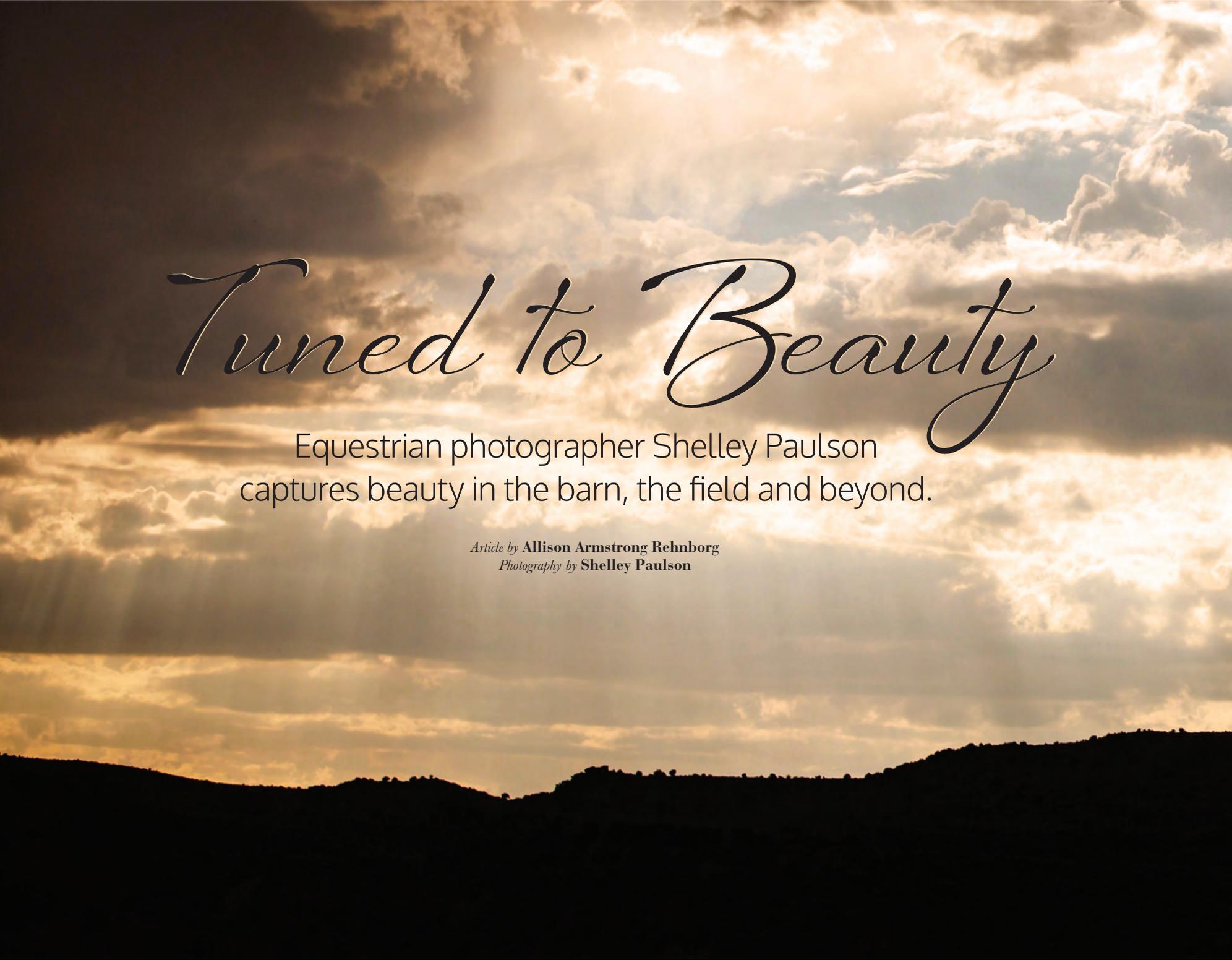


DISCOVER

{ CULTURE }





Tuned to Beauty

Equestrian photographer Shelley Paulson captures beauty in the barn, the field and beyond.

Article by Allison Armstrong Rehnborg

Photography by Shelley Paulson

Shelley Paulson spends her life chasing light. But once caught by Shelley's lens, sunbeams become more than illumination for a gorgeous snapshot. In her work, the golden light is a key element—as much a character as the horse, woman or cowboy lined by its rays.

“How I use light is always part of the story,” Shelley said. “If I'm photographing someone riding fast and exciting, I might put them in strong light because it supports the story. But if someone's having a tender moment with her horse, I want the light soft. When the light matches the story, you can feel the moment happening in the photo.”

A freelance photographer in Buffalo, Minnesota, Shelley specializes in horses and equestrians.

Whether she's posing high school seniors and their horses in classic portrait sessions or documenting the daily activities of riders and their horses in lifestyle sessions, Shelley loves capturing the relationship between horses and people. It's a special connection she understands personally as well as professionally. Shelley's own horses, a chestnut mare named “Maggie Sue” and “Fritzie,” a bay mare sporting flashy chrome, regularly star in her commercial and stock photography.

“Horses have had a profound impact on my life, my heart and who I am,” Shelley said. “When I was first trying my hand at photography, I took photos of everything. I happened to take one photo of a girl and her horse. There was something

so emotional about the image that showed their connection.”

Shelley started out as a full-time wedding photographer, traveling the world in pursuit of the golden, timeless photos for which she quickly became known. But she also continued to take photos of horses, capturing images of equines and people posed forever in dreamy moments of time with sunlight wafting in the downy hairs of a windblown mane, sparkling in the eyes of a girl or slanting past the brim of a man's cowboy hat. As a photographer, Shelley understands the significance of moments. She also knows that some moments that can alter a life forever.

“One day as I was coming out of the bathroom



at a car rental facility in San Jose, California, I slipped on some water and fell head-first onto the concrete floor,” Shelley said. “My head hit the concrete so hard it split the skin.”

The fall left Shelley with a traumatic brain injury. As a result, she was crippled by fatigue, unbearable headaches and the nagging sense that she was always off-balance. The lowest point came when her neurologist pinpointed the reason for her balance issues.

“My doctor told me that my brain was perceiving my environment differently than reality, and it was causing my balance to be off. And that’s why I felt like I was always falling forward. I had to shoot a big wedding the next day and I was so stressed,”

Shelley remembered. “I called my husband crying and told him, ‘Whatever it takes, I can’t do this anymore.’”

Her lowest point became a catalyst for change, and with the encouragement of her husband, Tracy, Shelley stopped booking weddings and trained her focus on equines, instead.

“It was a huge leap of faith to let go of my primary income and hope the horses could fill the gap,” Shelley said. “But I thought about that first image I took of the girl and her horse. I set out to capture that connection because it resonated with me and I knew it would resonate with others, too.”

In time, Shelley’s equine photography business blossomed, providing her with a career as ful-

filling as the wedding world but with less stress; that, along with treatment from her doctors, has helped the symptoms from her injury decrease significantly. These days, Shelley and Tracy live a life of rural bliss on their Minnesota hobby farm, with Fritzie and Maggie Sue frolicking just outside their windows.

“I don’t regret my fall because of all the good things it brought into my life, especially living on this farm,” Shelley reflected.

When she’s not at home caring for her horses, Shelley is taking photos of clients or booking shoots for her commercial, stock and editorial photography. In 2018, Amherst Media published her first book, “Horses: Portraits & Stories,” a



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collection of Shelley's favorite horse photos taken throughout her career and the stories behind the images. That same year, she embarked on a year-long daily photography project, "Beholding," where she sought to slow down and seek out the overlooked beauty of her everyday experience.

"It's almost a craving for me to photograph beauty when I see it," Shelley said. "That project tuned my eyes to beauty even more."

One of Shelley's greatest gifts as a photographer, according to longtime client Ashley Chmielewski of Foley, Minnesota, is bringing moments to life with her camera.

"Shelley has an eye for observing a scene and capturing it with a unique perspective," Ashley said. "This turns her images into truly beautiful pieces of art. She always goes above and beyond to capture a moment in the most beautiful way possible."

Some of Shelley's favorite images are of unexpected moments, like when the dust rising from a dirt road provided the perfect atmosphere for a high school senior's portrait session with her Paint Horse.

"We were shooting by some trees in a park and a car drove by on the dirt road nearby at just the right moment," Shelley remembered. "The dust

started coming through the trees, creating the most amazing, ethereal rays of light. I positioned the girl and the horse under those rays and created one of my favorite images of all time."

While many photographers dread stormy days, Shelley says that sometimes the most extraordinary images come from the worst weather.

"I was shooting at a ranch one summer in Utah, when it started to rain. I was so mad because I had to stop taking photos," Shelley recalled. "But then, the clouds started parting and showing the sky in these amazing configurations of clouds and rays of light. You can't get those kinds of images on a clear, sunny day."

Whatever the weather, there's something about Shelley's photography that, like a horse, speaks to the heart. Her photos not only capture beautiful moments, they also illuminate the emotions that connect us to our horses.

"I don't know how horses feel about us, but I know how we feel about horses," Shelley said. "I want to capture that feeling. I like to put people in great locations with great light that will help tell the story, and then I step back and let the magic happen. And it always does because of how we feel about our horses." 

Discover Shelley

Find more of Shelley's golden, glowing work online.

shelleypaulson.com
shelleypaulson.wordpress.com