

local life CHARLES L. ROSS

A good picture is worth a thousand compliments

Howard Zucker uses photography to make clients proud of their bodies

"THAT'S SEXY," SAID DAVID, somewhat astonished as he looked at a photograph of himself. Concerned about aging — he's 53 — and his weight — "beefy" — he saw that the photographer had captured something more than what David usually saw in the mirror: There he was, shirtless in tight jeans, and he looked hot.

David continued to review the images that photographer Howard Zucker had just taken. Beautiful head shots. "Wow!"

Provocative leather. "I can't believe that's me." "See how wonderful you are?" says Zucker. "You are exploding out of the photo." Teasing underwear.

"I had no clue that they would turn out this well. This is very moving for me," David says, his voice breaking as his eyes welled with tears.

"Many people carry negative images about themselves," Zucker says later. "When they look in a mirror, they see those negative images. The purpose of my photography is to show them what they really look like, and that they look good."

Zucker, who's photo studio is called SylvesterQ, has been taking photographs for about 10 years, first in New York, and then in Fort Lauderdale, where he moved about a year and a half ago.

"Over the years, I found that by connecting with a person's essence, photography can bring a shift in his understanding of himself and the way he sees his body image," Zucker says. "I bring out a side that was hiding because of inhibitions."

Joe described himself as "a mess" before he met Zucker. "I don't think I'd ever seen a happy picture of myself, and I actually challenged Howard, saying that I didn't think he could do it."

Not only did Zucker take the only photos of Joe that he likes, there was an additional payoff. "Soon after the photo session," Joe says, "I came rocketing out

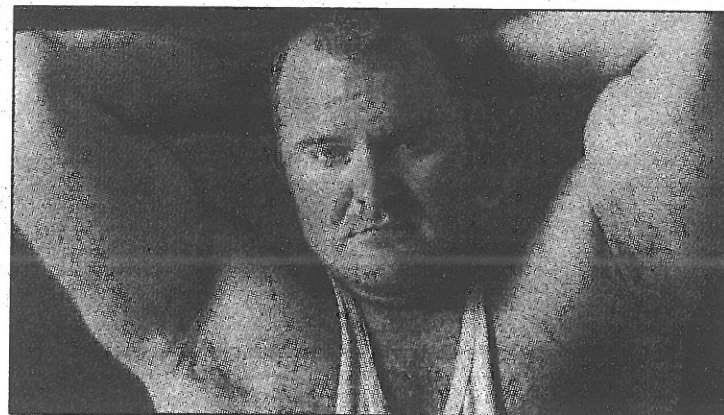
of the closet."

"Often the photography experience helps a person let go of barriers," Zucker explains. "After a session, people see themselves in a more positive light and break through old issues. The process is often extremely healing."

The photographer realizes that negative body images can be deeply rooted in a person's childhood, and that long-lasting change can take time and effort, so he has sometimes recommended a client to Dr. Deborah Wolf, a New York spiritual psychotherapist.

"I look over the contact sheets with a patient," Wolf explains, "and we discuss the issues. I take the negative images patients have of themselves and show them their own beauty."

"Gay men, especially men who are overweight or aging, often have self-esteem issues because they don't match the physical perfections idealized in the gay community," Wolf says. "Your self-esteem is connected to everything — your way of thinking, your immune system."



Chris Ovide, who works out at a gym five days a week, didn't feel his body reflected his efforts. He still felt "small." Looking at the photographs Howard Zucker took of him, Chris said, "I felt proud of myself. I'm big!" When he posted his pictures on a website for muscled bears, he got more than 500 hits and 100 e-mails a day and was listed as one of the top five men on the site.

For some of her patients, she has suggested a photo session with Zucker. She knows first hand how well a person will be pleased with the pictures. "He did a series of me," she recalls. "I have never had such beautiful pictures of me."

Before David decided to have photos taken, he looked through Zucker's portfolio. "These are all models," he says, feeling he could never match their beauty.

"No they aren't," replies Zucker. They're ordinary people just like you and I."

After the session, David realized he fit right in with the other beautiful "models."

"We're a good team," said Zucker, "but it's mostly you."

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