William Hobart Sumner Jr.
Honored Friend and Photographer
by Carla L. Grillo
FOREWORD

The following story is an excerpt from the full profile on award-winning local photographer William “Bill” Hobart Sumner Jr. appearing in The Past Is A Present, a book by local author Carla L. Grillo highlighting the life stories of 28 women and men from Gloucester’s diverse Senior community. Sponsored by the Friends of the Gloucester Council on Aging—and over five years in the making—The Past Is A Present features over 500 hours of oral histories tracing each Senior’s unique personal background. Curated with hundreds of historical photographic images and contemporary portraits by Bill Sumner himself, the book is available online at www.pastisapresent.org and at The Bookstore of Gloucester, Dogtown Books, and the gift shops at Cape Ann Museum and The Gloucester House. 100% of sale proceeds benefit the Gloucester Senior community.

ABOUT THE COVER PHOTO

Photo of Bill Sumner in May of 2019 at the Rose Baker Senior Center (photo by Carla Grillo).

www.pastisapresent.org
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Bill Sumner’s passion for photography began when he was a young boy in Concord, NH, where he was born in 1943. His father, William Hobart Sumner Sr., had converted their kitchen into a darkroom (to the dismay of his mother, Jeanette Swenson Sumner) and, according to Bill, “I was hooked the moment I saw the images magically appearing in the chemical solution.”

Having spent most of his childhood in Wayland, MA, Bill graduated from the Dublin School, a private boys’ school in Dublin, NH. After a brief stint at Hobart College, Bill indulged his love for skiing and became an instructor and tour guide at Killington Mountain in Killington, VT. It was there at Killington where he began filming with Super 8mm film, cleverly parlaying his nascent love for photography into his first paid photographic work of families enjoying his skiing tours of the mountain.

During his time at Killington, Bill met Bob Greenway—a visionary in education—who was involved with an experimental college in the foothills of the White Mountains of New Hampshire. One thing led to another, and Bill became a member of the first class at Franconia College. Since there were only two student photographers, he was immediately enlisted for the school’s in-house photography needs. In addition, Bill and his roommate (distinguished documentarian Lenny Kamerling) started a small photography business in the Village of Franconia, “which was probably the only one for 50 miles.” After his sophomore year, Bill spent two years living in Del Norte, CO, where, along with fellow student and future wife Normanda Smith, he set up a Headstart program for preschoolers through VISTA (Volunteer Students of America). He returned to Franconia to write his thesis and received his BA in Sociology in 1966.
Soon after graduating from Franconia and the birth of their first child, son Brook in 1968, Bill and Normanda relocated to New York City where Bill hoped to gain cutting-edge experience as a professional photographer. He quickly landed an internship with renowned photographer Arnold Newman—“I just showed him my portfolio, and he hired me on the spot.” Newman was notoriously “difficult to work for,” and Bill soon realized his nine months were longer than most interns had been able to last. However, he learned an incredible amount, particularly lighting techniques, from the demanding artist.

Bill’s lighting experience with Newman landed him a pivotal job with another eccentric New York City photographer, Joyce Rainbolt, one of the first women in the business who handled the photography work for major corporate advertisers across the country. She hired Bill to be “her lighting guy” and sent him to Los Angeles to light massive set productions. Her sets were legendary in Hollywood—Bill remembers the likes of John Wayne dropping by to gossip with the crew. During preparations just before an important corporate photo shoot, Rainbolt suddenly became very ill. In a New York City minute, her representative turned to Bill and said, “You’re shooting this!” This “trial by fire” experience was a significant turning point in his life—“I was just a lowly lighting assistant thrown into directing a major corporate shoot. At 22 years old, it gave me tremendous confidence and real credibility in the industry.”

The four years Bill spent in New York City were all formative in his development as a professional photographer. However, in preparation for their second child, daughter Melissa, they moved back to New England, to Brighton, MA. After the birth of Melissa, they relocated to the quaint Lanesville neighborhood of Gloucester in 1970. That same year, Bill found studio space in a 19th century fire station across the street from South Station in Boston. From there he launched a successful photography business, representing major advertising accounts, including his first sneaker account, Converse. He remained in Boston until 1976, when for business reasons and personal (he and Normanda separated), he left for Dallas, TX.
“Dallas was where my career really began to take off,” says Bill. He worked for a variety of national clients such as American Airlines, American Express and Hyatt. One particular billboard shoot for the Dallas Morning News featured a man reading a newspaper while riding his bicycle. Nike saw the ad and contacted Bill, and the rest is history—the beginning of a beautiful relationship that lasted over 30 years featuring Bill’s photographs of Nike’s celebrity clients, including the likes of Michael Jordan, Kevin Durant, Charles Barkley, Dan Marino and John McEnroe. Back in the pre-Internet days of the 1980s, the poster was the primary way for kids to look at their favorite sports heroes “all day long.” Nike is credited with inventing some of the most innovative theme-based posters of athletes, and Bill was one of the original photographers of these iconic sports posters—“Those sports posters were some of the most fun things I ever did.”
His first photo shoot for Nike was memorable: the famous “Doomsday Defense” of the Dallas Cowboys during its dynasty years of the late 1960s and 1970s. Shot in a graveyard with atmospheric fog and a “Philly” tombstone, Bill had brought in big carbon dioxide machines to simulate the mist. In the middle of the shoot, Harvey Martin and Ed “Too Tall” Jones said they “didn’t feel too good,” and the rest of the crew started feeling dizzy. With the burly Dallas players (and everyone else) outside on the street taking deep breaths, Bill realized the oxygen in the room had been replaced with CO₂!

Wanting a change of scenery and a location more conducive to his love for sailing, after 11 years in Dallas, Bill moved to Florida, where he lived on his beloved catamaran, the Melly-Magoo, at Dinner Key Marina in Coconut Grove (Miami), Fl. He spent the next 15 years taking family and friends on memorable adventures, sailing throughout the Florida Keys, the Bahamas and the Caribbean. While in Florida, his photographic subjects naturally expanded to include tourism, resorts, charter cruises and real estate.
After 22 years in Florida, Bill sold everything and moved back to New England where he could be near his children and grandchildren. He bought a log cabin in Athens (near Grafton), VT, and built a spectacular backyard treehouse for the grandchildren, complete with a sleeping loft and a zipline for quick escapes. He smiles, “This was a dream come true for me. I always wanted to build a treehouse.”
When the grandchildren got older, he returned to Cape Ann, where he and his daughter Melissa jointly bought a large property in West Gloucester, a five-minute walk from son Brook’s house. Bill renovated the antique barn at the back of the property, turning it into a charming combination loft and photography studio where he held photo shoots and photography seminars, and hosted countless dinners for his grandchildren’s soccer and basketball teams. He is a proud grandfather of five—son Brook (Director of Athletics at the Landmark School in Beverly, MA) and his wife Caitlin (Foley) have three children: Hannah, Charlie and Bebe; and daughter Melissa Wilber (a freelance graphic designer who provided the beautiful interior design for The Past Is A Present) has two children: Liam and Ethan.
During the Covid-19 pandemic, Bill remained active by donating his professional photography services to Gloucester humanitarian causes. In April 2020, he and three other local photographers (Jason Grow, Shawn Henry and Paul Cary Goldberg) helped raise over $30,000 by shooting professional portraits of 245 families in various poses outside their Cape Ann homes in exchange for donations to The Open Door (a non-profit in Gloucester supplying food and meals to those in need). Forty of their portraits were selected for the inaugural show, “The Porch-Rait Project,” at Cape Ann Museum’s new James Center on Poplar Street in Gloucester.
From June 2019 to September 2021, Bill contributed his time and professional talent to photographing the beautiful contemporary portraits of the Seniors appearing in The Past Is A Present. To everyone’s delight, Bill could be seen clicking away at socially distanced group and individual photo sessions with the Seniors, whether outside on flower-festooned Stacy Boulevard or at private venues.

For a more extensive look at Bill’s professional portfolio, please visit his website at: www.billsumner.com.
A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I am forever grateful to Bill for donating his time and extraordinary talent to photographing the Seniors in The Past Is A Present. For more than two years he worked during unusually challenging times, producing portraits that are truly works of art. In December 2022, Bill passed away after a brief and courageous battle with melanoma. He was 79 years old. I was honored to call him my friend.

FRIENDS OF THE GLOUCESTER COUNCIL ON AGING

The Friends of the Gloucester Council on Aging is a 501(c)(3) charitable organization incorporated in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in 1988. We are currently celebrating our 35th anniversary in our mission of working collaboratively with the Gloucester Council on Aging and the Rose Baker Senior Center by providing financial assistance and technical expertise for programs and services benefiting the broader Gloucester Senior community. For more information about the Friends, including a sample of projects funded and supported by the Friends since its founding, please visit: www.friendsofthegcoa.org.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is with much gratitude I would like to acknowledge the following:

Lucy Sheehan (retired Executive Director of the Gloucester Council on Aging) – for introducing me to Bill Sumner back in May 2019. She said, “He is sailing in the Bahamas for the next few weeks, so you probably won’t hear from him straight away.” Less than an hour after sending my email introduction, my cell phone lit up with “Bill Sumner” calling from his boat... we spoke for the next two hours as if we were old friends.

Melissa Sumner Wilber (Bill’s daughter) – for providing the beautiful interior design for the book. Faced with the challenge of how to incorporate so many of the family photographs for each person profiled, she came up with the brilliant concept of using a photo collage.

Nike, Inc. – for permission to reprint the two sports posters photographed by Bill of Dan Marino and the Dallas Cowboys “Doomsday Defense.”

Jason Grow – for coordinating samples from Bill’s “Porch-Rait Project” photographs.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carla L. Grillo is the creator, author, and editor of The Past Is A Present project – celebrating the incredible lives of 28 Seniors from Gloucester’s Senior community, affectionately referred to as “The Gloucester 28.” Over five years (2017–2022) in the making, more than 500 hours of oral histories were chronicled for The Past Is A Present.