

Simply the best

Sean McGowan, South Australia's best photographer, got a second chance at his dream after moving to Kangaroo Island. **Kathie Stove** tracks his mid-life career change

Regional communities don't come much smaller than Kangaroo Island, population 4300. And in small communities, multi-tasking isn't so much an option as a necessity. Just ask Sean McGowan, Kingscote shoe-shop proprietor and Best Photographer at the 2009 South Australian Media Awards.

This very part-time photographer started with Kangaroo Island's weekly newspaper *The Islander* (circulation 2025) in October 2007. Within two months he was in the thick of the bushfires that engulfed much of the island and, according to *The Islander's* managing editor Shauna Black, that was when he discovered the potential of news photography.

"The fires really sealed the deal for him," she says. "He threw himself into it."

For McGowan, the experience was that awful mix of excitement and great sadness. "All those men and women fighting the fires and supporting the fireys were doing such hard work. That kept me really focused."

Those fire photos were seen further afield. *The Advertiser* used two on the front page and one across pages two and three.

Now, after less than two years as a newspaper photographer, *The Islander's* shooter has been named South Australia's best for 2009. The judges commented on McGowan's "all-round excellence showing creativity and technical ability across news, feature and sports photo categories".

McGowan has been clicking away since his parents gave him a plastic camera

"He is a perfectionist, always challenging himself to do better. And he has the enthusiasm of a cub reporter. He loves this work"

when he was around 10. There was a time when he wanted to be a professional photographer, but he made decisions that he thought had precluded that option.

"Now, in mid-life, I have been given the second chance that most people don't get. That's why I put in the hours for the paper, because the paper gave me the opportunity. If I hadn't come to Kangaroo Island I'd still be a retail shop assistant."

Sean and his wife Carmen moved to the island in 2004, after buying the Kangashoo Shoes business in Kingscote. He was still taking photos with a film camera, but the business came with a digital camera used for snapping products and he soon decided he needed one of his own.

"The Nikon D50 had had terrific reviews in the magazines so I splashed out and got a second-hand one for \$1000."

One of the first images he took with his new camera, a portrait of Carmen and their daughter Jemma, won him the show champion title at the Kingscote show. He won again the next year.

Soon afterwards, long-time *Islander* photographer Lenny Robinson retired due to illness and Shauna Black approached McGowan to replace him.

"In my rookie year, I made the finals in the 2008 South Australian Media Awards in best news and best feature. Lenny won the best sports photo award. Naturally I decided I needed a better camera," says McGowan.

But it wasn't all smooth sailing. In a country newspaper, sports photos are the number one priority and McGowan's biggest day is Saturday. He had never shot sport and after seeing his first week's effort, Shauna Black simply told him: "Face, ball, action."

"He took that advice to heart and almost every single photo he gives me has those things," says Black. "He is a perfectionist, always challenging himself to do better. And he has the enthusiasm of a cub reporter. He loves this work."

Once a sportsman himself, McGowan loves being in the thick of it. "I avidly watch all sport so am able to anticipate, and be ready for, the action sequences.



"Declan's Dawn" by Sean McGowan

"I like to apply an artistic bent to the photos I take. I try to get the proportions correct; I'm always looking for patterns and shapes, watching the rule of thirds. Even when I am out shooting sport, which happens extraordinarily quickly, I am still looking for those interesting patterns."

At this year's South Australian Media Awards, McGowan also won best feature photo for his Anzac Day image "Declan's Dawn" and was a finalist in the two other photography sections: best news photo and best sports photo.

"Declan's Dawn" was a shot he saw in the making. "I was immediately taken by this serious kid, only 4 years old and wearing that great lump of his great-grandfather's medals on his chest. I waited till the sun came up a bit but his hand was covering them. He had clearly been told how precious they were and that if anything happened to them..."

"I just couldn't get him to let them go. Finally I asked, 'Did you see those soldiers at attention when the trumpet was playing? Can you show me how they do it?' and he dropped his hands. Two quick shots were all I had time for."

McGowan's boss wasn't shocked by his win. "There are actually advantages for a photographer at a newspaper such as ours. Because Sean is our sole dedicated photographer he gets a lot of exposure in our paper," Black says.

She also sees the award as a triumph for country newspapers. "Print journalism in South Australia is more than *The Advertiser* and *Sunday Mail*. There are 32 newspapers around the state and so much good work is happening in them that people in the city never see. They are crucial to their communities – for most country people, the local newspaper is their only source of local news."

And contrary to trends in larger newspapers, *The Islander's* circulation has increased in recent years. It may have something to do with the photos.

Kathie Stove is a freelance writer and editor. She edits a monthly arts page for *The Islander*