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Cover photo by Sam Diephuis





# GOTCHA! IT'S VENICE PAPARAZZI

Edizen and Alex Stowell make the cut

BY BETTY BAILEY • PHOTOGRAPHY BY SAM DIEPHUIS

If the community of Venice has a heartbeat, Edizen and Alex Stowell have a finger on its pulse. They are Venice Paparazzi — chroniclers of soirees and creators of two websites that keep tourists, and Venetians, up to date on local events. You can find them at parties, capturing the action with cameras, or setting up photo booths that work with the push of a button. Their websites showcase an archive of more than 600,000 local photographs.

The Stowells are entrenched in Venice and its lifestyle. For 16 years, they've covered its celebrations, its protests, its birthdays and milestones. But finding solid ground in this beach town was no easy thing — it was a hard-fought battle that took determination and a whole lot of hustle.

The couple met in 2000. Edizen traveled to Southern California from her native Canada to visit her sister who was working in Glendale. "I was just on vacation," she says. "Part of the vacation was to come down to Venice Beach and walk the boardwalk and boogie board," she says.

Alex, who had grown up in Huntington Beach, was a Venice Beach regular by then. He had become familiar with the community years before, when introduced to Venice by a football teammate at Golden West College. "I would ride with a friend to Gold's Gym," he says. "We'd be trying to out-bench press and out-squat each other."

He was practicing with a boxing bag at Muscle Beach when Edizen spotted him. "It was 4:45 on August 15," she says. "He had long blond hair, black shorts and a beanie. I walked by him and said, 'If you punched up higher, you wouldn't look like you were beating up kids.' "He had the nicest smile."

Rather than being insulted, Alex was curious and listened to her advice. "She was giving me some tips — cleaning up my form a little bit," he says.

She wasn't merely flirting. Edizen, a former boxer for the Canadian national team, knows her stuff. "I just gave him a couple of tips because I love boxing," she says. However, she admits, "It was me who instigated things with, 'Hey we should exchange numbers.'"

It was the beginning of what Edizen still describes as, "this long and very exciting date." Six months later, they were married but kept it a secret for fear that Edizen's family would think it was too hasty. "We didn't tell anyone," she says. "I'm from a Filipino family. I have three sisters. After all, I was only on vacation."

Their next step was figuring out how to build a life together. "I had a degree but what could I do with it?" she says. She started by printing a business card. "It said, 'Need your resume typed? Script written?'"





*Right: Venice Paparazzi's co-founder Edizen Stowell is presented the 2015 Spirit of Venice Award and a City of L.A. Certificate of Recognition by City Council member Mike Bonin at the Abbot Kinney Festival.*

*Credit: Venice Paparazzi*



Edizen, who earned a degree in marketing from the University of Windsor in Ontario, Canada, had been around the business world since childhood. "My parents owned a restaurant," she says. "I did all their fonts and graphics."

She took a job at the Venice Beach facility of the L.A. Department of Recreation and Parks. "Just to figure things out," she says. She also enrolled in classes in Spanish and photography to help her embrace her creative side. "I have parents who say, 'Work hard; finish school,'" Edizen says. "I'm first generation. I claim to be an artist now but back in college there was a saying, 'Friends don't let friends take art.'"

Living at the beach, they were drawn to the boardwalk and the cast of characters who worked there. "Those artists on the boardwalk were super happy," Edizen recalls. They decided to see how they could fit in and make a living.

"It was a lot of jobs and a lot of reinventing," Edizen says. "At one point, Alex actually tried doing henna out there."

In late 2002, they decided to combine the skills of business and photography by making and selling photo key chains. They built a small

kiosk on top of a wagon and set up shop at the southern end of the Venice boardwalk. "Everybody had to walk right in front of us there," Edizen says. "We would sell the key chains for five dollars. I would stand out there and snap a photo and yell, 'Gotcha! Paparazzi!' It was just a funny, L.A. sort of thing." That saying would become their new business name.

They quickly realized they were onto something. "We got our first assignment in Pacific Palisades," she says. "A guy wanted key chains at his birthday party."

Edizen's job with Recreation and Parks sparked another idea. "People would call with questions and I realized we needed a website," she says. "There was one, but it was not up to date."

The couple bought some domain names in 2004. A year later, they went online with their photos, showcasing Muscle Beach Championships, bodybuilding, basketball and art events. "I remember taking photos of my friends and putting them online," Edizen says.

It took two more years of serious hustle before they saw a breakthrough — the skate shop Venice Originals hired them for a Friday





night event. "That was a game changer," Edizen says. "It was our first night event off the boardwalk and out of our friends' houses and apartments."

"We bought a stamp that said, 'Venice Paparazzi — see if you made the cut,'" Edizen says. "We passed out cards and took photos and we've been doing that ever since."

Curiosity about their photos drove people to the Venice Paparazzi website. There, they also found a calendar of events. "People started going there to see what was going on around town and to get their photos," Alex says. "They could learn about the rules for having dogs on the beach or what the parking restrictions were."

By 2006, the business had taken off enough that the Stowells could branch out and try other ventures. One idea called upon a shared interest — they wanted to run a boxing gym. "I couldn't get through a workout without someone asking me how to do something," says Alex. "People wanted to learn how to box and they wanted us to train them. The light bulb came on — I could get paid to work out."

To get started, Alex took a kettle bell certification course. "I turned the garage into a gym," he says. "Then, I added video so people could log in and look at their sparring."

"We trained I don't know how many locals," says Edizen.

"Hundreds," adds Alex. "Maybe more. I run into people all the time and they still think I'm out there on the beach teaching classes."

Today, their sole focus is photography. "The photo agency, that's where we're heading," Alex says. "That's our money. We just did nine events in 13 days and that's not super uncommon."

Their hard work and hustle has garnered awards from the Venice Chamber of Commerce to the United States Congress. They've also earned a place in the annual Abbot Kinney Days. "They now hire us to be their official photographers," says Edizen. "It's great how the community has given back to us."

When their website became crowded, they added a second. While [venicepaparazzi.com](http://venicepaparazzi.com) shines a spotlight on locals, [visitveniceca.com](http://visitveniceca.com) is geared toward tourists. "If you're coming to Venice, it should tell you everything — where to park, where to stay, what's going on," Alex says.

In a busy community like Venice, keeping up with all the events is a tall order. "A lot of it comes just through our boardwalk roots," Edizen says. "Having worked out there full time for three or four years, we know a lot of the local business owners and restaurants."

"It's a very organic thing," adds Alex. "Just being on the scene is the way we know what's going on."

Being on the Venice scene has also enriched their personal lives. Edizen co-founded the Venice Art Crawl, for which she was honored with the 2015 Venice Spirit Award. Alex serves on the board of the Venice Chamber of Commerce and plays in the local band WarSeed. He hopes to breathe new life into the death metal band genre. "There's an underground current," he says. "I think it just needs some new blood."

Alex, who in 2009 earned a degree in history from Cal State University Northridge, writes content, generates blog posts and email blasts, and takes care of the business-related tasks. "He is the writer; he does all the communications," Edizen says. "Creative photos, that's my part of the job. I'm always online editing. It's my art so I always want to create the final project."





Technology has made their jobs easier — open-air photo booths with touch screens that create and email instant photos have replaced their homemade devices. “We had built a couple of them ourselves,” says Alex. “We pieced together a monitor and software and printers — that was a nightmare. You’d get to a job and things wouldn’t work, no matter how many times we’d tested at the office.”

They hope the new technology will help them continue to build their photo booth business and increase their media presence while they begin a new endeavor — starting a family. “We’re working on that,” says Alex. When asked his thoughts on raising kids in Venice, Alex says with a shrug, “Once we get one, we’ll let you know.”

Edizen is more outspoken on the subject. “Everything started in Venice,” she says. “Our kids would be presented with everything here. Everybody comes to Venice — people from different countries.”

For now, their dogs Smithers and Gertrude are a central part of their lives, even getting into their daily fitness routines. “We do parkour (obstacle course training) at the Muscle Beach Gym,” says Edizen. “Gertrude jumps over the benches so we get there early.” She says Smithers prefers to run along next to Alex’s skateboard.

Venice is where their story began and both of the Stowells say they don’t plan on leaving. Their reasons are both romantic and practical. “The beach is magical,” says Edizen. “We have a nice ocean front view and it’s incredible to see the sunset.”



*Alex and Edizen in a Venice Paparazzi photo booth*

*Credit: Venice Paparazzi*

“We are self-made people off of the boardwalk,” adds Alex. “It’s not like we’re a corporation who can move their office around. It’s just the reality. You play the hand that’s in front of you.”

Edizen says the key to their success is, “locality and longevity tied together.” “We’ve covered events and met so many people here — from the late night bar crowd to family events,” she explains. “After 19 years, I’m seeing these kids grow from a human being in a belly to being an adult. That brings joy. You’re behind the lens. You’re seeing it all. You’re growing with them.”

Summing it up, “I can’t think of any other place that would be as much fun,” adds Alex.