

# ***Seniors Alarmed When Expensive Portraits Never Arrive***

by John R. Oberholzer

Senior year can be exorbitantly expensive. From grad night to graduation, from college apps to prom, from cap and gown to SAT/ACTs, students can rack up costs in the thousands. One major factor in this cost is senior portraits. And recently, families at Tech have expressed opinions ranging from annoyance to downright outrage about the price and service of the current senior portraits provider.

Oakland Tech partners with photography company ABC Portraits for all of its photography services including ID and yearbook pictures, graduation pictures, dances, and sports pictures. Because OUSD is under contract with the company, no other services can be hired for any event. However, many students and their families are upset because of ABC Portraits' high cost and poor customer service.

In order to have their picture in the yearbook, seniors must pay \$20 for the picture. In order to look at the picture online and choose which shot to put in the yearbook, they must pay \$25. For physical photographs, the cheapest package is \$247 for two 5"x7", four 3.5"x5", and 24 wallet-size. From there, prices go all the way up to \$447 and beyond. There are many other add-ons and options, most of which are for purchases of at least \$150. The cheapest is one 8"x10" or two 5"x7" for \$50 each; retouching all package prints will take an extra \$50, and retouching the digital images will be \$70. Senior Vanessa Lara said it simply: "They are TOO EXPENSIVE."

There are concerns about equity in the pricing of the pictures. Senior Megan Phuong said that "some of those packages are half of my rent, half of my monthly income. Not everyone can afford that kind of thing. It's really unfair to lower-income students." A large proportion of Tech students are low-income, and these prices cannot be taken lightly. Many students do not even understand that there are alternatives to paying such a high price for their senior portraits.

While only a picture taken by ABC Portraits can be in the yearbook, there is an alternative for those who cannot afford such extravagant rates. Families can choose to pay the minimum price for the yearbook photo and then hire an independent photographer for the main portion of their senior pictures. This can also give the student more leeway about the pictures that they choose to print, the location, their outfit, and other details of the portraits.

In addition to the high pricing, many families have complained about ABC Portraits' customer service. Grievances include the appointment registration breaking, misinformation and inconsistency, receiving the wrong pictures, trouble disallowing pictures to be used in ABC publications, appointments running late, assorted other troubles with the company's website, and chronic denial of responsibility by the staff. However, the most alarming – and frequently recurring – issue is that families have ordered and paid for pictures, only to have them never arrive after months of waiting.

Furthermore, many families have reported that the company was difficult or impossible to reach by any means of communication.

However, the story may be deeper than it appears from our perspective today. News records from the San Francisco Chronicle in 1996 show unrest at Tech over ABC Portraits, the contracted photography company. Apparently, Tech students were upset because their leadership chose a photographer at the beginning of the year only to have their decision overruled by the school district, who forced them to use ABC. By December, students and teachers were upset because they had not received ID pictures from ABC. What's more, the delays caused by OUSD's refusal to accept the student leadership-referred photographer could have resulted in an extra \$5,000 in yearbook costs, for which the student leadership appealed to the school board for financial coverage.

Why was ABC Portraits chosen in 1996 rather than the photographer student government voted on (and approved unanimously)? When the school hired the student choice, the owner of ABC, Calvin Harrell, filed a complaint alleging that the contract did not fulfill district policy. At the time, the guidelines of the district stated that being a minority business in Oakland should be worth 38% of the decision in choosing a photographer -- and Harrell's ABC Portraits was an African-American business in Oakland, whereas the other company was white-owned and located in Hayward. There was criticism, however, that ABC was the only minority-owned, Oakland-based school photography company available and thus had an unfair monopoly on the contract. Furthermore, the students said that quality was a more important factor and that they did not like the work of ABC, criticizing it as sloppy and unprofessional.

Harrell's defense was that race composed an important part of the competition. Because photographers make different amounts of money depending on the school they work at, Harrell claimed that white photographers cherry pick the schools they work at (some of the most lucrative schools, including Skyline at the time, could result in \$20,000-\$40,000 profits). However, the competing company contradicted this, saying that they had in fact sought contracts at less lucrative schools, including Fremont and McClymonds. Harrell also asserted that white yearbook advisors were keeping business within their circle of white photographers, monopolizing a black-majority district.

In addition to this controversy, ABC Portraits faced troubles in these years from other clients. At El Cerrito High School, Harrell was accused of bidding a different price than that advertised to students in 1993. Similar allegations at Oakland High School in 1995 resulted in a consumer fraud investigation by the Alameda County District Attorney. No charges against Harrell resulted from the investigation, and he maintained that these problems were simply misunderstandings. Allegations emerged from El Cerrito High School that Harrell rebated less yearbook costs than he first agreed to, and from Berkeley High School that there were problems collecting money that Harrell owed. Finally, after the 1996-97 school year when ABC was awarded contracts to work at five out of six Oakland high schools, Harrell was barred from Oakland Unified School District contracts for one year after he violated district policy by not securing a contract before beginning photography.

Given the chaos that the controversy caused, including making the news, the Oakland School Board voted to increase the consideration in contracts of price, quality, and references from 62% to 80%, thus lowering the consideration of minority-owned and Oakland-located from 38% to 20%. Many people were unhappy because this decision dealt a blow to affirmative action during a time when such policies were being reduced in many areas. However, others claimed that Harrell had a “sweetheart” contract because he was the only minority-owned school photography business in Oakland. In the end, some teachers reported that ABC did increase the quality of its services, possibly as a result of these troubles.

What does all this mean for Tech seniors and families today? Perhaps nearly 20 years later ABC Portraits has managed to redefine itself. Or, based on the complaints being heard today, perhaps the company has not significantly changed at all. Regardless of the actual answer, the problem facing Tech seniors today remains.

Parents have caused a good deal of commotion on the PTSA Yahoo Group. One member, Pamela Consear, has decided to take action on behalf of Tech families. She said, “I took on this advocacy role because I’ve been hearing the litany of parent complaints since my older daughter entered Tech in 2007, and I want people to know they have options, especially for senior portraits.” Ms. Consear says that she intends to communicate with the Tech administration about how portrait contracts are arranged, present the mass of complaints and suggest alternative companies to the administration, and keep in contact with the parent community.

ABC Portraits did not respond to requests for comment on this issue.