



DREAM JOB: BENTLEY MEEKER

EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED FOR CELEBRITY LIGHTING GURU

By WENDY STRAKER January 8, 2007



GUIDING LIGHT: Meeker's company does 1,000 events a year, including luxe galas and celebrity weddings.

AT 14, Bentley Meeker dropped out of high school, moved to New York and took his first job, as a photographer's assistant. Fifteen years later, he started his own lighting company. Today, as CEO of Bentley Meeker Lighting and Staging, he lights more than 1,000 A-list events every year, including private parties for Robert De Niro, galas for the Whitney Museum and the New York Philharmonic, and weddings for celebrities such as Billy Joel and Catherine Zeta-Jones.

You got your first lighting job at age 14; how did that come about?

I came to New York to live with my dad. He needed to find someplace for me to be during the day, so he introduced me to the guy who lived across the hall who was a photographer. My father told him our situation, and just like that he said, "I'll take him during the day. I'll pay him

\$15 an hour." I was responsible for setting up the umbrellas and the lights and the strobes for his photo shoots. I would also scout locations for shoots. I didn't really think about it as a career. I was just happy to have a job. And I was happy not to be going to school.

At what point did you discover your passion for lighting?

It wasn't until I took film classes at Hunter College that I started to really play around with light. That's when I got a job loading trucks for a company that provided lighting for rock concerts. That exposure to the business helped me learn how things worked. Eventually, I started getting lighting jobs on my own.

Did you seek out any mentors along the way?

I called everybody. I was a persistent little bastard. I called people who were so established that they probably never received cold calls. I annoyed so many people, but in the end it worked. Preston Bailey was one of my earliest clients, and a mentor. I'll never forget when he gave me a shot. He hired me to light a red rosary with red lights. He really took a chance on me.

How has your job changed now that you own one of New York's top lighting companies?

We do about 1,000 jobs a year, which is a lot. But if you have the right infrastructure and the right apparatus and the right people and design concepts, it works very well. I'm giving much less direction on-site than I ever was two years ago, when we had half as many jobs, and that's probably one of the most gratifying things for me. Now my job is much more about coming up with design concepts for the company and deciding on the direction of the company. It's still artistic and emotional, but it's also strategic and technical, and I like to straddle that line.

Do you have a favorite event that sticks out in your mind?

I've lit some pretty amazing events. Celebrity weddings with limitless budgets, the Grammys, fashion shows, you name it. I did a bat mitzvah at the Rainbow Room where Aerosmith, Stevie Nicks, Tom Petty and Don Henley performed. It was unbelievable. There was one moment when Steven Tyler was playing the drums, and he got tired and wanted to take a break. He was looking for some relief, but I chickened out. Then this 16-year-old kid got up there and just rocked the house.

How do you measure your success?

I used to measure it by the number of events I had in a given weekend within the four corners that hold the Plaza, the Pierre, the Metropolitan Club, the Harmony Club and the St. Regis. Then someone gave me some advice, and it stayed with me. He said, "You're not going to look back on your life and think about how much money you made or how many great jobs you got. You're going to think to yourself, did I spend enough time with my son?" I always make time for my son. When I have my son, I have my son, and the world just stops.