

# Durham Photographer Finds Success Chasing Dream After COVID Layoff

[northcarolinanewsdaily.com/durham-photographer-cornell-watson/](https://northcarolinanewsdaily.com/durham-photographer-cornell-watson/)

David Straughan

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However, if it wasn't for COVID-19-related layoffs, they might have never happened.

## **It's a round peg, square hole, kind of story.**

Professional photography wasn't always the gameplan for Watson. Before COVID-19 hit, he was building a steady recruiting career with some marquee names.

"I worked in talent acquisition for the past eight years," said Watson. "I've been employed for some very large corporations including TEKsystems, Fidelity Investments, LexisNexis, NetApp, and Credit Suisse."

But as he grew in his career, Watson grew less comfortable with many aspects of corporate culture. Working in talent acquisition gave him an insider's view of hiring practices.





Durham photographer Cornell Watson's self-portrait  
Photo courtesy of [Cornell Watson Photography](#)

“I got a first-hand view of systemic and institutional racism,” he said. “In many situations I saw managers choosing white-sounding names over ethnic-sounding names when the resumes were identical. I saw the differences in salaries, differences in job titles, and differences in disciplinary actions between black and white employees.”

On paper, Watson's career was on the type of trajectory many aspire to—working in more important roles for bigger and bigger companies. However, no matter which company he worked for or which role he worked in, his frustrations remained.

The problem, as he sees it, isn't specific to one or a handful of companies. It is cultural.

“Being Black in corporate America is not an easy task,” said Watson. “You are constantly forced to contort yourself into the ways of whiteness. I felt exhausted.”

### **COVID-19 forces layoffs, changes**

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When COVID-19 first broke as a story in the United States, Watson was working as a talent recruiter for NetApp. While he remained employed for several months, he saw the writing on the wall.

“Losing my job was inevitable with the way coronavirus was ravaging our nation,” he said. “I was lucky my employment lasted as long as it did. It was scary because I remember what it was like trying to find employment in 2009.”

Like most Millennials, this recession is not his first go-round. Watson graduated with a B.S. in Marketing from North Carolina A&T in 2009, right in the middle of “The Great Recession.” So, when this recession started, he was more aware of what lay ahead.



Durham photographer Cornell Watson setting up his exhibition at Durham Arts Guild.  
Photo courtesy of David Straughan

“I knew this time would be worse,” he said. “Because trying to pick up a job at a restaurant or anything part-time would be impossible with the impact of social distancing and business closures. And when it actually happened I became depressed. That was a bit of a surprise because I knew all along that it was coming.”

## **Becoming Cornell Watson, Durham photographer**

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Watson had been working nights and weekends to develop his skills and grow his networks. That work gained him a little local notoriety in Durham while he was still working as a recruiter.

In 2019, the Durham Arts Council featured Watson’s work in their “Portraits of Durham” series as part of Durham’s 150th Anniversary celebration. Then, in April of this year, they asked him if he was interested in having a solo exhibition.

“I was like, “hell yeah I am!,” he said.

So, when Watson was eventually laid off in June, he saw it as an opportunity to leave a world that had caused him so much frustration over the past eight years.

“When I found out I was losing my full-time job, I thought to myself that it’s now or never,” said Watson. “I’d made so many investments. I attended photography conferences online workshops. Paid for an online education and all my equipment. I built a solid network of people in the industry who are essentially my photography family.”



One of the photos from “Behind the Mask” waits to be hung at the Durham Arts Guild  
Photo courtesy of David Straughan

That network eventually set off a chain of events that helped people recognize Watson’s talent. And quickly.

“One of my instagram followers referred my information to a local magazine,” he said. “I started freelancing for them the Monday after I lost my job.”

From there, things accelerated very quickly.

“Weeks later into my full-time photographer journey I was awarded a commercial job photographing a national ad campaign for one of the nation’s largest telecommunication companies,” he said. “And most recently my photography was published in The Washington Post.”

## **A look at “Behind the Mask”**

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Despite the big-name clientele, Watson is focused on his Durham Arts Council exhibition for now. As opposed to commercial work, “Behind the Mask” gives him a chance to directly address the topics closest to his heart.

“I put all the chips on Black,” he said. “Pun intended.”

The exhibit is a series of 10 high-contrast, mostly black-and-white photographs. Black people are the subjects of each photo. While the photos depict these people doing normal, everyday things such as sitting in a chair, a palpable sense of drama in each one alludes to the very real tensions of everyday life for Black Americans.

In the artist’s own words, ““Behind the Mask” is every day for us as Black people,” he said. “Our ancestors put on the mask every day to protect the existence of future generations of Black people. And today we still wear the mask. As Black people we’ve been forced to contort ourselves to exist in white spaces at the expense of our own comfort.

Watson has positive goals for the exhibition, too.

“My hope is that white people start to look within themselves to understand how they contribute to a society that forces us to wear this mask,” he said. “And I hope Black people feel inspired to pull off the mask and be free regardless of whether white people decide to change or not.”



Photo courtesy of David Straughan

It's the type of exaggerated realism that fits nicely into the Southern Gothic canon of which Watson is now a part. And it's a subject that finally has the attention of a larger audience.

“More people are listening than before because of the police murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor,” said Watson. “I’ve been talking about injustices for years, but this time it seemed different.”

### **How to see “Behind the Mask”**

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People will have a chance to see Watson’s work up close and personal soon. “Behind the Mask” opens at the Durham Arts Guild on the first floor of the Durham Arts Council on Tuesday, September 15. The Guild is introducing a phased re-opening and social distancing and masking requirements will be strictly enforced.

Prints at the exhibition are for sale. Watson is donating all proceeds from “Behind the Mask” to [Village of Wisdom](#), a Durham-based non-profit advocacy group for young black people and black families. The Durham photographer has already raised more than \$4,000 for the organization through this project.



Cornell Watson stands with one of the photographs from his “Behind the Mask” exhibit.  
Photo courtesy of David Straughan

While he hopes his photography career continues its current trajectory, Watson has bigger goals in mind for his art.

“I want us, Black people, to see ourselves and the many variations of the Black family in spaces that have denied us that privilege,” he said. “I see myself doing more impactful work that sheds light on injustices and also work that shares our joy despite all the hurdles we face.”

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