

24 Hours in Toledo

## JCPENNEY PORTRAIT STUDIO [1 TO 2 P.M.]

**Please, please smile for the photographer**

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*This is the 14th in *The Blade's* series of 24 weekly stories that will chronicle people and places in Toledo, hour by hour. Today we are at the JCPenney Portrait Studio.*

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Three words are key to Marion Brown successfully doing her job.

Monkey. Turkey. And, of course, booger.

"Those are the for-sure ones that will get them every time," she says between shoots at the JCPenney portrait studio at Westfield Franklin Park, where she's the manager. It's her job to coax smiles out of kids, no matter what.

"Can you say 'monkey?'" she asks a boy about to turn 5.

He can. He does.

"Did you call me a monkey?" she responds, horrified. "Why you calling me names?"

The kid, Austin LaVigne, cracks up.

She snaps a picture.

Austin, here from Temperance for some birthday photos, is an easy mark. She gets him to say "chicken," "pickle," and "stinky toes" before the shoot is over and he laughs every time. (For the record, she never would think of asking anyone to "say cheese.")

"He has got the giggles," says Miss Brown, 34. "All I have to do is look at him and he cracks up."

Miss Brown is a jack-of-all-trades. She answers phones, takes the pictures using real film, then sells packages to customers using digital images on monitors just outside the studio.

Prices can range from \$3.99 a sheet to \$199 for a top-of-the-line package.

The walls of this portrait palace are covered with children — smiling babies, pouty babies, naked babies, garden babies, kids with bunnies, kids getting married ...

Miss Brown has been in the business since she was 18, so she knows all the tricks for working with these little ones, especially the toughies with stranger anxiety who like to scream and jump around.

"You have to have the same mindset as they do," she says. "You tickle them, you play with them. ... You kind of just think as a child would think."

Her theory is put to the test shortly after 1:30 p.m., when a 2-year-old named Caleb walks in wearing white Addidas and clutching a yellow toy car. He's here to get a spring portrait, accompanied by his mom, Brittani Gerber, 18, and his grandmother, Jeni Gerber, 38.

But first, some changes — Caleb gets a new, spiffier outfit and Miss Brown replaces the background of the last sitting with something more springy.



Caleb Gerber, 2, plays at the Heatherdowns Branch library a few days after having his picture taken at JCPenney. (THE BLADE/ERIC SUMBERG)

Minutes later, the boy is sitting on a table in the camera room, propped up against a couple of fake logs with pictures of flowers behind him. Two plush bunny rabbits eye him from a few inches away. (JC Penney stopped using real bunnies around Easter a few years ago after People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals picketed some of their locations.)

Caleb looks easy. Miss Brown moves his arms and legs and, like a doll, he leaves them right where she puts them. Perfect.

Except ... no smile.

The South Toledo kid looks completely disinterested in what's going on around him. He doesn't grin or laugh; instead, his eyes glaze over and his mouth remains expressionless.

Miss Brown picks up one of the bunnies and playfully sits it next to him. Caleb flips it off the table onto the floor, where it bounces once, then twice. Subsequent bunny forays are similarly rebuffed.

"He's a typical 2-year-old," the photographer says, snapping a couple of pictures in the few moments Caleb is caught looking at the camera.

It doesn't get easier, even with the help of Miss Brown's assistants, Elmo and Cookie Monster, who are stashed in the back of the room amid a bevy of props, including a birthday cake, rocking horse, hockey stick, rubber ducky, and pink boa.

Elmo gives Caleb a kiss. Cookie Monster plays peek-a-boo. The bunny makes another unwelcome visit. Miss Brown makes funny, puckering noises.

Mom sits down and hugs Caleb for a picture. Grandma joins the picture too.

Still, nothing. The boy looks off into the distance, chin angled up, neck sunk into his shoulders, mouth slightly open.

"Caleb, what's up with the broken neck syndrome you've got going on?" Miss Brown asks.

As 2 p.m. approaches, hope is running out and Caleb is getting tired. Still, the others continue to play games, make noises, offer toys. Until ...

*Snap!*

Miss Brown can breathe a sigh of relief.

"That's the shot."

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