



Hi everyone, I'm Kristin Rutkowski, a portrait photographer in Maryland. I'm excited to share about Her Helm, a project I created to celebrate, through portraits, women captains. This is a bit of what has pulled so much of my focus (lol) the past few years, so I'm excited to share with the photo club.

I'll give you a little bit of my background, both on the water and behind the camera. Then I'll share how Her Helm was created, steps about producing a book, and the museum exhibit.

## Me - Sailing and Portraits



(the first picture is me on the bow of our old sailboat, taken by Young Choe. The next two are self portraits of me)

I'm a portrait photographer here in Maryland (also working with amazing people in DC and Virginia and Delaware). I make my clients feel like movie stars for the day, either dressed up or dressed down, and create gorgeous portraits of them.

My husband and I had a sailboat, and we love being part of the water life here in the Bay.

Sailing around the Bay, I didn't see many woman who captained their own boat. At least I didn't think I saw them. Spoiler alert: I fell into the trap of society's stereotype and assume that the men captained and the women crewed.

## Personal Projects

Personal projects are SO valuable!

- [APA DC](#)
- Matthew Rakola: [The Learn Project](#)
- [Hannele Lahti](#): Dog Photography
- Clark Vandergrift: [Tree People](#)
- [My projects](#)

I attended a talk about personal projects given by the DC chapter of APA, including presentations by these three (and other) amazing photographers. It sparked the thinking for large personal projects.

## Her Helm

Recognize that women have a place at the helm

Normalize the fact that women captain boats of all sizes

Celebrate the women who choose to be in charge

And that brings us to how I created Her Helm.

I like having personal projects alongside my client work – this gives me some extra creative freedom to expand my skills and explore more subjects. Last year, as I was thinking through what interests me, and what I would want to dedicate effort to, I went back to my thoughts about women on the water. And decided that my project would be female captains.

Similar to STEM fields, which also needs to improve its diversity, the women here are living and working in a field which is predominantly white male.

With this project, I want to help break the stereotype that keeps women as crew, I want to show that women are also the captain. This is a stereotype that \*I\* fell for, and I'm glad to be able to do something now to help change that. Whether that's by owning their own boat or earning their USCG license and working commercially, women are in this industry just as equally as men. The numbers do still skew male, but by providing more role models and working to increase female representation, we could move to even out that ratio, which in turn creates MORE role models and representation, in a beautiful feedback loop.

I'm proud of the particular eye I bring to this project. I'm not portraying boaters to all look rough/"sea-worthy", or pigeonholing women as decorations. I show there is nothing different about many of these women than any other full female personality we know. As a portrait photographer, I'm looking to show each women that she is incredible just by being in her role. It's beauty and grit combined.



And here is the beautiful grit!

Her Helm features women who captain ANY kind of big boat – fishing charters, tug boats, ferries, sailboats, power boats. The current focus is in the Chesapeake – that’s simply because that’s where \*I\* am, and all the travel is on my own time. In the future, with sponsorship, I may increase the scope of the project.

These are all full personalities of women in our community. These women are special, but in a relatable way. It's a way to be special that can be aspired to by any girl, whether that girl is shy or bold or from the coast or inland. In this way, representation matters so much. It’s awesome to show the world, children especially, that this is possible. Some of the women here grew up with amazing support and have the confidence now that reflects that. Some women now provide that support to their children.

One fun story about how important representation is: one particular woman told me that, because she owned a sailboat and taught her son to sail, he grew up assuming that \*all\* mothers taught their sons to sail.





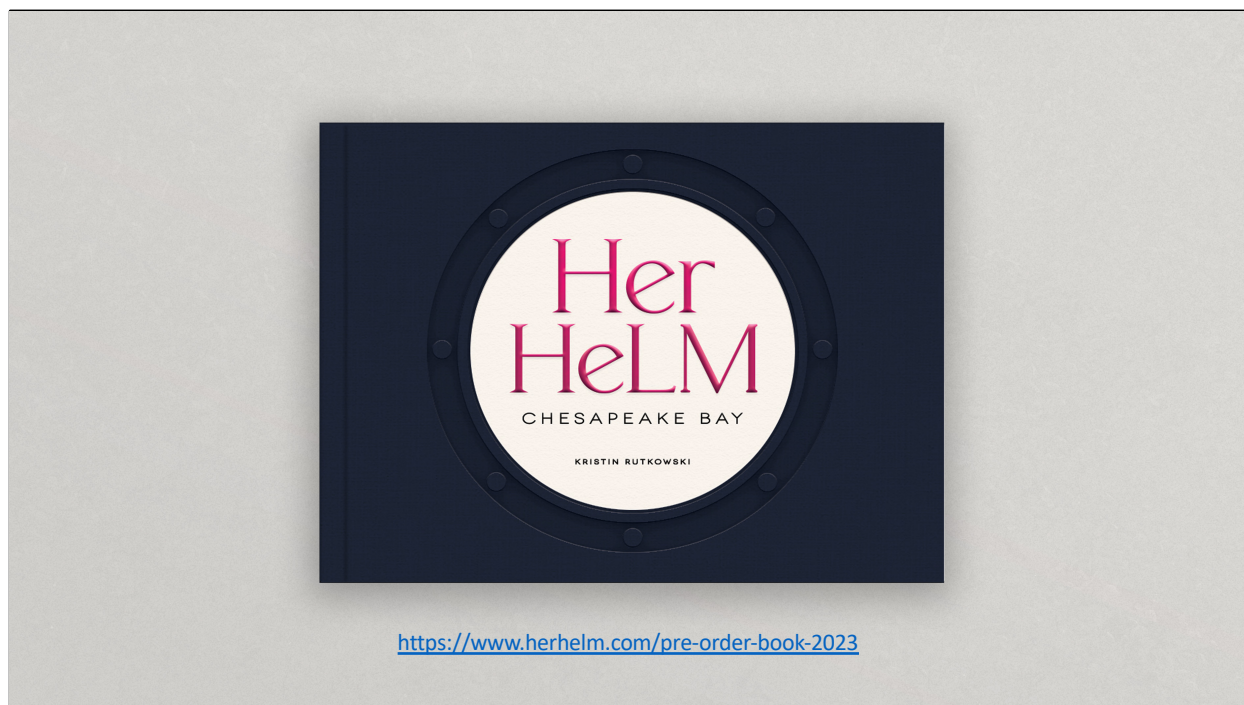
The logistics of the project became more polished as I went on. I had a lot set up in the beginning (basic framework, boundaries, website, etc), which helped immensely, but if I had waited until I had everything ready, then I would never have started.

Unlike my full portrait sessions, which involve a hair and makeup artist, an assistant, families, and often in studio, the Her Helm sessions were pared down. Olha joined for Liz Wardley, the Maiden skipper (right-most picture), which was great to have company for this amazing visit.

Sometimes I brought a strobe and lightstand and umbrella/softbox. I only lost one light to the water during the project (a sandbag might have helped, but it's awkward on a boat).

Each session/sky/sun/weather/boat/woman was different. So I had to think quickly on my feet once I arrived to determine how and where to position the woman for the best portraits.

Then I went home, chose THE Her Helm portrait, retouched it, and set up the webpage, delivery, etc.



The book!!

I did not plan a book from the beginning. Throughout the project, it became apparent that it needed a book. That was an entirely new learning process – reaching out to printers, learning ISBNs, hiring a designer (well worth it!!), learning Adobe InDesign. It was a fun new thing to learn.

I am creating exactly the art book that I want, without too much compromise. It will be an absolutely beautiful fine art portrait book, worthy of a place of honor on your shelf. Each captain has a full spread – her portrait on one side, and my paragraph about her on the facing page. At the end of the book is a section with invited artists, sharing their poems, painting, and stories, to add to the celebration.

<https://www.herhelm.com/pre-order-book-2023>



## Exhibit at CBMM



Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum  
St. Michaels, Maryland  
Exhibit Opens: Friday September 8, 2023  
Artist Talk: Thursday September 14, 2023 at 5:30 PM



<https://cbmm.org/her-helm-portraits-of-women-on-the-chesapeake/>

A selection of the portraits will be on exhibit at the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum in St Michaels. We should have a photo club field trip!

I grew into my big goals for this project. It took time to get over my fear of those big goals, and to allow myself to dream even bigger. Some of that is coming from just all the work I'm doing on the project – it's giving me the confidence to dream big.

For your project or your passion, go at the pace you can sustain. Still dream big! And then figure out how to get there.

Keep in Touch!

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