



Mary's first time seeing the Atlantic Ocean, with leftover wedding flowers from a freelance job in Charleston, S.C.

# What Freelance Floral Designing Has Taught Me about Flowers, People and Growing Up

By **Mary Schaeftbauer**

The first time I got on a plane by myself was last October, I was 18, and I was flying across the country to do floral design work for someone I had never met.

Over the past year, I have worked with five designers, each in a different state. For a kid who grew up in a rural Midwest town of 13,000, it's been a pretty big deal for me!

At the **Slow Flowers Summit** 2019, I learned about freelance floral design—doing contract work for a designer for one busy weekend. It seemed like a perfect blend of traveling, which I've never really done before; working with flowers; and meeting new people. Minnesota's floral off-season, when my own flower farm and design studio are inactive, is long and frigid, spanning October to April. It's the perfect time for me to frolic in warmer climates where there is work available.

Eighteen years old and ready to fly the nest but bound to it by one more year of flower farming, freelancing for others provided the perfect opportunity to get out into the big wide world, and I was going to seize it.

My first two jobs were with people who I met at the Slow Flowers Summit, after which I felt confident enough to fight off the "impostor syndrome" and scroll through the list of hundreds of people I follow on Instagram. I personally cold-emailed most of them with a résumé, asking if they needed any help. Before I knew it, I had scheduled myself about one weekend per month during my off season.

Not to sound too cheesy, but every weekend that I worked was a life-changing experience.

Of course, I learned so much about flowers. When you work on a wedding with someone else, you learn not only about how they design flowers but also what their workflow is, where they source flowers, how they construct installations, which flowers they love and which flowers they hate with a fiery passion. If you're inquisitive, you can also learn about how they market their businesses, how they organize contracts and how they got started. I now have the absolute privilege of being able to pick out my favorite things that designers do in all those areas—because every person is different—and bring home those insights and lessons to make my own business so much better.

Mary (left), poses next to Slow Flowers member Kelly Shore of Petals by the Shore. This was her first big arch installation in Leesburg, Virginia in January 2020.



I've worked in South Carolina at **Roadside Blooms**, which was the first time I had ever worked with designers who actually cared about sustainability and local sourcing. In Arizona, at **Posh Petals**, I learned about how florists design for the heat and dryness of the desert. In Maryland, with **Petals by the Shore**, I learned more about sourcing American-grown flowers and about the industry as a whole. In Texas, with **Clementine Botanical Art**, I helped put on the biggest wedding I have ever seen. In Georgia, at **Urban Poppy**, I gathered tips about efficient retail workflow.

What I also learned is that although every designer and every studio is different, there are so many things that are universal to all florists that make me feel instantly at home with nearly every studio or design crew. One of my favorite parts of freelancing is that in every corner of this country,

nothing is quite like a florist's love for beauty and flowers. Everyone has a different story about how he or she got started, but every story starts with that love, and the best part is seeing the unique ways it shows through in each person on the team. Everyone who has worked in floral knows how soul-crushingly difficult it is to pull off the performance that is a big wedding, and they know how satisfying it is to see it all finally assembled or the face of the bride as she receives her bouquet. There's a universal thread of understanding with everyone who's worked with flowers that makes it easy to connect with total strangers.

I guess that's why I'm so willing to put my fate into the hands of such total strangers. When I tell friends at home that I counted on people I've never met to make sure I get picked up from the airport, to pay me, to let me stay in their houses



with them for a week, to even show me around the area if there's free time—and doing it all at 18-19 years of age, they think I'm crazy. I do my research before I go, and I have had difficult experiences and made mistakes that I've learned from. Maybe I'm naïve, but frankly I've never felt that it's too unusual. There's something about flowers that make us a family.

And, may I say, the generosity of floral designers with their time, their knowledge, and even their own homes is unmatched.

I've learned so much as I've ventured out of my familiar age and peer group and small town, and as I've worked alongside people with all sorts of backgrounds from all over the country. My flower family continues to expand and support me as I grow up and come into my own in this industry, and for that I am truly grateful.

I've been chronicling some of my adventures on my YouTube channel, so if you're interested in a closer look at the craziness and beauty, check it out!

I am also available for freelance work starting this October onward. I can't wait to see what else the world has in store for me, and I would love to work with you! You can reach me at [sonnenblumeflowers@gmail.com](mailto:sonnenblumeflowers@gmail.com).

*NOTE: We first met Mary Schaeffbauer at a Slow Flowers meet-up in St. Paul, Minn., hosted by Twin Cities Flower Exchange in 2018. The following year, Mary and her business, Sonnenblume Flower Farm & Design, joined Slow Flowers as a member, and she volunteered to help at the "Slow Flowers Summit." She has the distinction of being our youngest member. This essay first appeared in [slowflowersjournal.com](http://slowflowersjournal.com). ■*

#### DETAILS

Sonnenblume Flower Farm & Design,  
[sonnenblumeflowers.com](http://sonnenblumeflowers.com)  
[@sonnenblumeflowers](https://www.instagram.com/sonnenblumeflowers)