Photographic Vision Youths see a different view of life with Scott Lapham's class

Arthur Kimball-Stanley
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BY ARTHUR KIMBALL-STANLEY
JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

“I was going nowhere until I had photography in my life,” Alan Martinez, 19, from South Providence, said. “I wasn’t doing anything with myself.”

That was more than three years ago, Martinez said, a time when he was well on his way to dropping out of Hope High School. But he was lucky enough to stumble on a program being offered by AS220, the community arts center located in downtown Providence, called Photographic Memory.

Martinez said he was walking down a street near AS220 and saw a number of young people going inside. He decided to do the same. That was where he met Scott Lapham, the founder of the program, and where he was first given a chance to learn about photography.

“The program was pretty amazing,” Martinez said, “so I just kept coming back.”

From how to work in a darkroom to how to understand concepts such as shutter speed and aperture, Lapham’s program teaches what seems to be everything, Martinez said.

Lapham said students are outfitted with cameras and set to work, creating images, learning how to change and shape them, and ultimately, learning how to turn the art form into a professional skill. “This is a career we’re trying to teach,” he said. “This isn’t some esoteric skill, but something you can make a living at. It’s not an easy living, it’s challenging, but you can do it.”

Lapham, a Rhode Island School of Design graduate who

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runs his own photography business in Providence, started the program after teaching a few classes at the state’s Training School. The experience, he said, showed him how much of an effect photography can have in giving young people some kind of direction.

“There is an emotional component to self-expression that builds confidence and can have real applications in fostering different technical skills,” Lapham explained. “This program shows them what it’s like to be a photographer and how they can do it.”

Photographic Memory has already been successful in changing a few lives, according to students who have participated.

The program, Martinez said, opened up an artistic side he didn’t know he had. Learning to see like a photographer, he explained, became a deep passion, one that led him to reorganize his life.

He enrolled in the Job Corps, a program run by the U.S. Department of Labor to help young people learn work skills, and a year and a half later attended the Community College of Rhode Island. He still works with Lapham, developing a portfolio that he plans to use to apply to a four-year art school.

“Scott asked me what am I going to do with my life,” Martinez said. “Then he told me to go for it.”

For Chandelle Wilson, 21, a junior at the Rhode Island School of Design, the Photographic Memory program was also affirming experience. After a teacher at the Metropolitan Community Career and Technical High School in Providence, suggested that Wilson attend one of Lapham’s classes, she decided to give it a shot.

“What was great about it was that it taught me enough about black-and-white photography that I got to the point where I could use the space myself to develop my own stuff,” she said. “Scott was like my first introduction to art school.”

Wilson ended up becoming a kind of intern for Lapham, accompanying him on photo shoots and learning the more professional aspects of on-site photography. The experience helped her build the portfolio to get into RISD.

Moving students from the introduction-to-photography phase to assisting on professional shoots is what Lapham said he thinks makes the program successful. Students learn not only a hobby or an art form, he said, but if they stick with the program they learn a skill. Knowing that they have learned something, accomplished something, he continued, builds a foundation for them to go on achieving.

By learning how to work with him as he makes his living, by going to photo shoots and being forced to act as a professional, students learn important social skills, as well as how to improve their photography, he said. Also, he added, by allowing them to stick with the program for an extended period, they are given a constant in lives that are in flux.

"Not every kid is going to RISD, and not every kid is going to go even to college," Lapham said. "But taking kids on shoots, taking them into a professional environment, can really give them a view of what’s possible."

For Kristen Chauvin, 20, of Providence, who has been with Lapham’s program for two years and is working on a portfolio so she can apply to art school, working on a creative skill in a professional setting was a great opportunity.

“I was explaining that there was no way to get back to doing anything once you had dropped out of school and then I found out about the program,” Chauvin said. "It was a really good balance of being able to do work on your own while getting help."

The program is open to anyone who wants to get involved, but Lapham said he wants to move it more toward young people who are having a tough time and can use photography as an outlet. Anyone interested in learning more may call AS220 at (401) 831-9327.

Part of the reason his program has been such a success so far, Lapham said, is the lack of other non-academic continuous programs to help young people get direction.

“There is a huge need out there,” he said. “There are a lot of students out there that fall through the cracks for a whole host of reasons. What this program gives them is the structure to get focused again.”

Christel Posario, 16, goes under the dark cloth to block outside light as she prepares to take a portrait of workers at the Dreyfus Building in Providence. Watching is Michelle Mancone, 17.

THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL / SANDOR BODO
PHOTOGRAPHIC VISION

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By Arthur Kimball-Stanley

Journal Staff Writer

Christel Posario, 16, goes under the dark cloth to block outside light as she prepares to take a group portrait of workers at the Dreyfus Building in Providence. Watching is Michelle Mancone.

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“There is an emotional component to self-expression that builds confidence and can have real applications in fostering different technical skills,” Lapham explained. “This program shows them what it’s like to be a photographer and I think shows them what can come out of sticking with and working on skills for a long period of time.”

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The program, Martinez said, opened up an artistic side he didn’t know he had. Learning to see like a photographer, he explained, became a deep passion, one that led him to reorganize his life.

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