

Ocean Camera Club Brings High Schoolers' Images Into Focus

by Victoria Ford



Competition Co-director Dana Cohoon handles student entries during last year's events.

On March 31, the Ocean Camera Club, a Lakewood-based organization established more than 30 years ago for professional and amateur photography enthusiasts, will hold its third annual High School Student Photo Competition, in which hundreds of photography students are expected to participate, each submitting up to six individual images for consideration.

Last year, according to club treasurer and competition co-director Dana Cohoon, 224 students representing 21 high schools in Ocean and Monmouth Counties submitted a total of 950 photographs, in five different categories: architecture, photojournalism, landscape/waterscape, human interest and photographer's choice (for those that fall into none of the aforementioned categories). The number of images entered in 2006 more than doubled the number in the inaugural competition, she said, so how many entries the 2007 event will fetch is anybody's guess.

A three-person panel of judges determines each photograph's total score, which is the sum of the judges' individual scores on a scale of 5 to 9. The judging panels are comprised of the Club's top photographers and respected local professional photographers (*Asbury Park Press* photographer Tom Costello has

judged previous contests and is expected to judge again this year). The four main scoring criteria are quality, composition, creativity and the photograph's appropriateness to the category into which it was entered.

First, second and third place ribbons are awarded in each category, and any photograph earning a score of 21 or higher is guaranteed at least an honorable mention. One photograph among the first place winners will earn the coveted Best In Show ribbon and a plaque, and some of the top-placing photographs will be automatically entered in the national youth competition of the Photographic Society of America, an international umbrella organization.

Entrants are not required to be present during the judging process, which will begin at approximately 9 a.m. on March 31, but are welcome to come to the Lakewood High School cafeteria toward the end of the judging, about noon, to speak personally with or ask questions of the judges. The public is welcome to come and browse the entries throughout the morning.

Last year a Wall High School student who competed in Lakewood went on to win the highest honor awarded in the PSA's national competition. In addition to a shot at national recognition, award-winning photographers and their parents are invited to attend the Ocean Camera Club's annual awards dinner in June.

Cohoon and club secretary Elena McTighe started the competition in 2005 with the primary purpose of exposing and acclimating fledgling photographers to participation in judged photography competitions, Cohoon explained.

Such competitions, which take place all over the world on scales ranging from small to large, serve as an answer to the question that persists in the minds of many talented photographers, not all of whom necessarily aim to sell their prints or to achieve widespread fame: "You take a lot of pictures, and — what do you do with them?"

In that way, the competition introduces young photographers to the concept of picture taking for a purpose, she said. It also gives them an idea of how

the industry defines photographic excellence and of the judging criteria to which an individual photograph is subject. Furthermore, the category designations teach students to think about where their images fall in the art form's spectrum of genres. In fact, incorrect categorization counts against a photographer's score — an image entered in the "human interest" category, for example, must at least partly contain an actual human.

The deadline for entry in this year's competition is March 17. Images may be color or black and white and printed either by the student or commercially. Entries must be submitted on paper, be neither mounted nor matted, and measure no smaller than 5 by 7 inches and no larger than 9 by 12. Digital alteration and manipulation is allowed, given the end result is still recognizable as a photograph.

"The art of photography has changed," Cohoon noted, referring to the prominent role computers play in photography classrooms nowadays. "Truly, the art form has changed."

Purists (as Cohoon herself used to be, she admits) should bear in mind, she explained, manipulative and "doctoring" techniques have been employed since photography's earliest days.

"I have come to accept it," she said. "All the changes Photoshop facilitates mirror techniques that have always been done in the dark room." Even the masters made no secret of adding a moon here, removing other details there, darkening, lightening or using infrared film — the computer software only makes such techniques easier to use and accessible to a greater number of photographers.

Club president Tom Garvey recalled how pleasantly surprised he was, having spoken to some of the young men and women who competed last year, by the creativity and skill the students' work demonstrated.

"At the high school level, they offer photography courses that go into great depth," he said. He added he believes today's students of the art form are able to "accelerate more quickly because the kids are adapted to using computers."

To market the high school competi-

tion, organizers notify photography all Ocean and Monmouth County high schools by way of mass mailing, the first of which was sent out in December along with an illustrative DVD teachers could show to students to give them an idea of the caliber of work that is submitted. But word is also spread elsewhere and by other means to let all students of high school age know they are eligible to participate, including those who are home-schooled and those without the express sponsorship of their high schools. Many high school photography teachers, Cohoon added, build the competition into their curricula by making students' participation a requirement for course completion or an opportunity for extra credit.

The Ocean Camera Club is a thriving hobby club founded by Harold and Anita Kessler of Lakewood. Today the club boasts an estimated 50 to 60 active members; in fact, Cohoon called it "the most active club in the area." The group meets weekly on Monday nights from September through June at the Lakewood High School and is sponsored by the Lakewood Community

School. Each meeting features a guest speaker – a professional, expert or award-winning amateur photographer – who addresses a given topic, be it related to a technical aspect of the art form or composition and subject matter. The final Monday of every month is reserved for a competition for club members.

The majority of the members are retirees; however, Cohoon said, the club has begun to attract a growing number of younger enthusiasts – a trend she attributes to the mass shift from film to digital photography. As it stands, she guessed about three-quarters of the membership currently shoots in digital while the other quarter remains loyal to film, the latter mostly for the purpose of creating slides.

For additional details about the competition, visit www.studentphotocontestOCCC.com or contact Dana Cohoon at (732) 361-6551. For information about membership in the Ocean Camera Club, contact club president Tom Garvey at (732) 682-8404 or visit the club's web site, <http://oceancameracclub.org>.