

Teacher in the Limelight
Photographer earns nationwide honor
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Body Text

It's just 8 a.m., and Linda Jay Jackson already is making her kids think.

She guides the students through a critique of the day's crop of newspaper photos: How were they lit? Why is each shot in the paper? What makes them good? Her voice is warm, but carries an edge that commands attention.

Nineteen teenagers and their gear -- backpacks, coats, schoolwork -- are crammed into the narrow, utilitarian photography classroom at the school district's King Career Center, sitting around salmon-colored tables that seat four, knee to knee.

The students sound like pros. The subject is well-lighted. The photo makes her look happy. The photographer caught her surprised, they say. Day in and day out, Jackson focuses on the products of professionals, aiming to ground her students in the world of work where there are clients to please and bills to pay. "It's not just the technical side of photography, but it's the business of making an image," she tells visitors to her class. "Everything you need to know to run a photography business."

Jackson, a professional photographer herself in her spare time, does her high school teaching job so well she recently was chosen by colleagues in national education organizations as one of 36 top teachers nationwide for the American Teacher Awards. There were 1,500 teachers competing for the honors.

The competition is sponsored by the Walt Disney Co. and McDonald's. Getting this far will make Jackson a star for at least a day. The first week of December, she'll be in Hollywood for the taping of a Disney Channel television show about the 36 teachers. During that week, the field of teachers will be narrowed to 12, and then to one. Each of the winners gets prizes, and the top teacher gets \$25,000 for her educational program. The awards show will be aired Dec. 14 and 15 on the Disney Channel.

Jackson said she never thought she'd get this far.

But it feels good. "Anytime you get a pat on the back it feels good. This is just a major whack."

It's hard to replace her when she's gone because her students do different projects every day. It's like juggling 20 balls at once. The kids work in seven darkrooms and studio spaces and classroom areas that make up the career center's media photography center.

In her early morning class one day last week, Jackson started with a few minutes' discussion, then students moved out. They were off shooting pictures, processing film, printing negatives, even building cameras.

A steady stream of students lined up in front of her. She slashed the air up and down, trying to get a girl to figure out what was wrong with her shot of a friend. It should have been taken as a vertical photo -- there was wasted space.

"Be sure to write on your assignment that you should have shot it as a vertical, or I'm going to mark you down."

There's value in knowing your mistakes.”

Another student showed her a row of negatives.

“What's your message?” she asked. “Oh yeah, I like it.”

In between, Jackson prompted the ones who didn't come forward.

Your self-portrait is more than a physical likeness, she told one. “We want to know something about you personally . . . it's something that you identify with. You understand what I'm saying?”

Jackson stayed on top of the action for two hours, switching attention from one student to the next every minute or so, advising, cajoling and evaluating students' work. Then she said goodbye, and geared up for her next class.

After school, Jackson still had a long night ahead. Her first stop was a university photojournalism class she's taking to refresh her skills, and after that, to the airport to meet the mayor of Darwin, Australia.

That's one of her duties as a member of the Anchorage Sister Cities Commission, to which she was appointed by Mayor Rick Mystrom. Mystrom said he got to know her in 1988 when she was a volunteer on Anchorage's bid for the 1994 Olympic games, which Mystrom headed. They've become friends; she's one of the few people who gets a hug from the mayor when she drops by.

Last fall, Jackson represented Anchorage on a trip to a sister city in Japan, Chitose. Mystrom himself just returned from spending a day there.

“The people in Chitose just love Linda Jackson,” Mystrom said. “I was at a dinner meeting, and the people were talking about Linda. They were all laughing and smiling. They said, ‘Linda is, how do you say it in English? Quite a character.’”

Even before she entered the Disney spotlight, Jackson already had a few thousand fans. Four thousand or so teenagers have gone through her classes in her 12 years of teaching at Bartlett High, two at Dimond and three at the career center.

Some students keep in touch for years. Wildlife photographer Mi'chelle Barnes-Ness of Kodiak, now 35, took one class from Jackson at Bartlett in the late 1970s. “What I remember is how excited she kept the class. She's a very animated person. You just really always looked forward to going to class.”

When Barnes-Ness was in the class as a high school freshman or sophomore, Jackson encouraged her to enter contests. She entered a citywide black and white photography competition called the Municipal Libraries Contest. She won first, second and the grand prize with photographs of a husky puppy, some boats at the Juneau marina and a street shot of Juneau taken while she hung out the window of a hotel room.

Barnes-Ness put aside photography in college, even sold her camera to raise money for school. But in the late '80s, a love of the outdoors prompted her to start shooting nature. In 1989, she happened to be flying over the Exxon Valdez oil spill in a small plane, and shot the roll of film that launched her career in photography. She sold images to National Geographic, Outside magazine, the National Wildlife Federation and other publications. “I'm still selling that one roll of film,” she said.

Jackson still finds Barnes-Ness's story exciting. “It shows a lot of initiative, and makes a great story for future classes,” she said.

Another student, Holly Parsons, just graduated last year, and right out of high school, had her first piece chosen

for a show. The untitled photo of girl with daisies was in the Rarefied Light show at the International Gallery of Contemporary Art in Anchorage last month.

Parsons now studies at the Art Institute of Seattle and plans to be a fashion photographer.

Jackson herself fell into the photography profession almost by accident. She raced through college, earning a bachelor of arts degree in dramatic arts by the time she was 20 from Whitman College in Walla Walla, Wash. When she got to graduate school, she decided to slow down and take some classes for fun, she said. One of them was photography. Instead of earning a master's degree in creative writing as she had planned, she walked away from the University of Alaska in Fairbanks with a master's degree in fine arts.

But though her career centers on photography, she doesn't regret her dramatic training. "A big part of education is entertaining them. Or you lose them," she said.

Her own photography is described by colleagues as experimental and personal. For example, one of Girdwood photographer Randy Brandon's favorite Jackson pieces is a three-dimensional still life with real objects including a spoon and a plate, and a Polaroid transfer image of a strawberry laid over them. The Polaroid transfer is the gelatinous, filmy part that contains the picture, without the paper backing.

Jackson is well-known among local photographers both because of her work and because she regularly hits them up to come talk about their lives and their work in her class, to bring a dose of reality to students' expectations.

"She has bribed me consistently, usually with a plate of chocolate chip cookies," said Anchorage photographer Chris Arend. About once a semester, Jackson brings students to his studio to see how a commercial photographer approaches the job, Arend said.

Other photographers tell similar stories -- brownies, cookies, and before they know it, they're giving a lecture to the class.

When students graduate, or before, Jackson may help them get entry-level jobs with the same photographers who lecture. Two of her students have worked for Arend as interns.

Brandon said her students are successful because she teaches more than the technical aspects, and more than the business side of the profession.

She conveys a sense of artistic edge to her students, Brandon said. "That's what it's about."

Following a presentation on Nepal, the Service High School Honor Society started the SHS Endowment for Nepal through the Heifer Project -- the first high school nationwide to begin an endowment through HPI. Recently, Service High students of teacher Ken Wooster sent goats to Nepal through HPI.

A new Rotary Club was recently formed in Baitadi in west Nepal, where girls typically quit school before third grade to perform manual labor. The club initiated a Girl Child Scholarship fund to keep young girls in school. It costs \$50 for one girl to attend school for a year. The first donation to this scholarship fund came from the Anchorage Soroptimists through HHN.

East Anchorage Rotary and the greater Rotary District 5010 are sponsoring a Healthy Eye Project facilitated by HHN, which will conduct vision screening for more than 8,000 Nepali elementary school children, and provide glasses and surgery as needed through BPK.

Data from screenings will offer valuable information for one of Nepal's first pediatric ophthalmic studies. Teachers at the school are being trained to give basic eye exams so vision screening can continue annually at schools. The rotary grant also supplies teachers with materials to incorporate healthy eye practices and nutrition information into lesson plans.

HHN's latest project is to raise \$1 million for life-saving surgeries and treatment for indigent Nepalis on an on-going basis through the Medical Emergency Endowment Fund. Rheumatic fever remains prevalent in Nepal, and there is a higher percentage of pediatric heart patients there than in developed countries.

Although a congenital heart surgery for a child in Nepal costs only \$1,500, some families earn only \$200 a year.

In 2002, Jackson was the first recipient of the Sister Cities International Dick Oakland Award for service to SCI and humanity. She was one of 10 women in the United States to receive the Women Helping Women Award in 2003 from Soroptimists International.

Jackson was a Fulbright Award recipient in communications and journalism, and was named one of the top three technical educators nationwide in 1996 when she received the American Teacher Award.

She was also honored by the prime minister of Nepal in 2001 for her humanitarian work, particularly in the area of avoidable blindness.

She has presented more than 60 programs on the local, state and national levels to raise awareness of Nepal.