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Focus on the future

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By Stacey Palevsky, Herald staff writer

The photography classroom at Richland High School contains relics of a dying art -- darkroom photography.

Inside the narrow room, shelves are lined with bottles of chemicals and boxes of photo paper. Old used film canisters are dusty. These tools, once a staple of photography education, are becoming nearly irrelevant as photo teachers and students increasingly turn to digital photography.

Richland High is one of three Tri-City high schools where students will return to a brand new photography class in August. Unlike Richland and Pasco high schools, Hanford will expand its darkroom this summer. The fall course will focus on the fine art aspect of developing photos in a darkroom, but will also provide instruction in digital imaging.

"I'm trying to keep up with the times," said Shawn Murphy, Richland High photo teacher. "The industry standard is electronic media and I have to prepare my students to work in that."

Letting go of tradition

The transition is not without growing pains.

"There's a certain romanticism and nostalgia that goes with the darkroom," Murphy said.

Andrew Eads, his Pasco High counterpart, said it's more than just an attachment to a tradition. Photo teachers are reluctant to go digital, he said, because film cameras remain the best way to teach students about how a camera works.

"Cameras are wide open pieces of machinery. You can open up the camera and immediately see what's going on," he said. "A digital camera, well, that little sucker is just sealed up tight. If you open it up, what are you going to see? You'd be looking at a super computer that gives you no clue as to how it functions."

Printing a photograph in a darkroom is labor-intensive. Before students could upload pictures and print a dozen in minutes, they would spend hours in a darkroom making just one shot look perfect.

"There is something to be said about traditional photography, in that it slows students down to actually think about what they're doing," said Stephen Chalmers, a professor of photography and digital media at Washington State University. WSU photography students still use the school's darkroom, but Chalmers said the program is gradually moving more toward digital imaging.

Elsewhere, teachers are hanging on to their darkroom even though students tend to favor the digital format. Wendy Dooldeniya, a photo teacher in Austin, Texas, said her students are most interested in printing images themselves in a darkroom.

"The magic still lives," she said. "But after they compare the hands-on approach to the digital ease in editing most are hooked on digital."

'Heart and soul'

Kamiakin High School was one of the first Tri-City schools to switch to digital, a move teacher Dave Speakes helped oversee

during the school's remodel from 2002-04.

The school still has a small darkroom. Students can use it if they want to, Speakes said. Most don't. Of the 114 pictures his students entered in the statewide Rainier photo contest, just two were black and white prints made in the darkroom.

"I can do stuff on the computer I could never do in a darkroom," said Shane Enoch, a recent graduate of Kamiakin. He pointed to one of his favorite photos he made this year: A close-up of a woman's mouth with her teeth digitally enhanced to look like they're made of wood.

Alissa Peterson, who also just graduated from Kamiakin, subscribes to a different school of thought. Peterson hasn't touched a computer mouse. She prefers to slave over her work in the darkroom.

"It gets you connected with the shot," she said. "You're physically doing it, you're not having a machine do it for you. It's like your heart and soul goes into the photograph."

At Richland High, Doug Callahan, a recent graduate, said he was sad to see a lot of the darkroom equipment packed into boxes for good. He prints all his photographs in the darkroom.

"It's so much more rewarding," he said.

His classmate Zach Hallum, another recent graduate, loves working with the computer. He said he first learned photography in the darkroom, but soon found it "restricting" and time-consuming. He wanted instant results and three years ago bought a digital Nikon D-70.

"I can get the same results but make more pictures and at a higher quality," Hallum said. "I hope students will continue to start with film, so they understand how hard it is to get the results they want. And when they go digital, they can apply the stuff they learned in the lab."

'Eye for the shot'

The three high schools will continue to operate wet labs, but they'll be downsized versions of existing darkrooms. That's how Speakes designed his remodeled facilities at Kamiakin. Before the school remodel began in 2002, he contacted five Washington high schools that had renovated their photo classrooms. All five maintained darkroom access, he said.

"To me, it's a fine art and should be a part of our curriculum," he said. "The only way I'll close down the lab is if I can't find those materials anymore."

That day might not be too far off.

Kodak stopped making black and white paper at the end of 2005. A year earlier it announced it would stop selling film cameras in the United States.

"It's like if GM stopped making gas cars and switched to electric," Murphy said of the scope of Kodak's decision.

Nikon announced in January it would stop making film cameras. Canon said in May it would stop developing new film-camera models, but would continue to make existing models as long as a demand remains. Also in January, Konica Minolta announced it would stop making all cameras, and it would stop making film and paper by 2007.

Though purists mourn the loss of film-based photography, most say the heart of photography beats strong no matter the method.

"It's not always the technology that matters," Callahan said. "A good photograph still depends on some luck and an eye for the shot. That will never change."

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