

## JOHN SHEEHAN'S LOVE FOR THE DIGITAL CAMERA

*By Roanna Forman*

There's usually one memorable moment in the studio, or getting that first musical instrument, when an artist says – "That's what I want to do!" It happened to John Sheehan, a young Malden photographer who fell in love with the digital camera and feels photography will be a part of his entire life.

John, who has Down Syndrome, became a photographer for a couple of reasons. "We used to volunteer at the McFadden Nursing Home in Malden, and I guess we were there for about a year and a half, almost two years, and we had to stop that for medical reasons," according to Tammy Bishop, John's personal care attendant for photography. "So I asked John, 'What do you want to do?' And he said, 'I want to be a photographer, or, to deliver pizzas.'"

Since John was too young to get a work permit for delivering pizzas, he became a photographer, like his idol Theodore Parker in Spiderman II. Borrowing Tammy's digital camera, John did a series of shoots beginning in the fall of 2005 that eventually featured him in the Boston Globe Sidekick and the Malden Observer. On April 8, John had his first showing at the SoHo Art Center in Malden Center. Tammy, who also works with John on social behaviors and pre-vocational training, remembers, "It was a struggle for him to be there. He wants to be outside, and do his fun stuff, and the gallery is not fun for him." At this point, he's developing the understanding that people will be curious about his work and ask questions.

There's an interesting creative partnership between John and Tammy, who stays behind the scenes and coaches him. She guides him with angles, subjects, composition. Yet Tammy demurs when asked if she's a photographer. "No, I am not an artist." With any suggestions, "it's all just trial and error."

Tammy has checked books out of the library, as well as a video on basic photography to improve her coaching, but John retains an intuitive, "definitely hands-on" approach. He focuses on his own work, is occasionally interested in others'. "Developmentally, he's still at a very young age," Tammy notes. His eye may develop as he works to produce more sophisticated images. Right now, John's not studying light, shadow, or depth of field, "he's just a kid with a camera." However, his skills, with the zoom, turning the camera, shots at different angles, have all improved with practice.

John's work is valuable in its own right, but also as a model for others. "The benefits of creative activity for developmentally challenged people are, first of all, that it involves them with the community," Tammy thinks. "It also educates people to the creative potential of these people. They're not just stuck somewhere doing every day, mundane things. For John and for other folks who have disabilities, I think it's a great way to just get them involved."

Of course, John's most obvious and ardent supporters are his parents. "The nursing home was good, but reality's coming too soon for him, that he's going to be working and doing that kind of thing, so actually having a creative outlet, I think they appreciate that," Tammy says.

As for the pleasure he gets from photography, John says, "It makes me feel bigger, stronger, and better." Out in the clean air, John says, he feels great. Using a digital camera, John concentrates on nature shots, buildings, and monuments at this point.

"I photograph anything, like beautiful flowers, roses, heroes, villains, Boston, angels."

Angels? "Well, not really."