

Tommie Shaw: Keeping an Eye on Nature
By Bill Hamilton
Louisville, Kentucky

TOMMIE Shaw, born into a family practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism in Kentucky, is now enjoying tremendous benefit beyond any expectation. Tommie is currently winning national recognition for his abstract and nature photography, but more important, he has made a major connection to his mother's thirty-year devotion to her practice of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism in a way that brought tears to his eyes as he spoke of it.

"For the first time in my life, I understand why Mom and other people are so devoted to the kosen-rufu movement and to SGI President Ikeda," said Tommie. "All he wants is for everyone to be happy. He has such compassion."

Tommie's photographic talent—his gifted vision and his intense study of photographic masters—paid off when he won grand prize in a contest sponsored by Petersen's *Photographic* magazine. The contest theme was "Reflections," and Tommie submitted his own image reflected in a small puddle of oil droplets on the pavement in front of his apartment (see inside back cover). The photo shows many tiny human images reflected beautifully in the swirling colors of the oil drops.

The same photograph, which the editors of *Popular Photography* called "Asphalt Artistry," was runner-up in one of that magazine's international contests. To capture such shots, Tommie said he has to constantly observe the world around him, keep his equipment in hand, and wait for just the right moment. His other photographs now attracting attention in local exhibits and other publications illustrate his love of nature, and the things others miss by not being as attentive to their environment.

Tommie is currently achieving his dream of giving more and more of his time, effort, and money to his dream of a life in professional photography. He has found a mentor in Art Wolfe, whose work in nature photography he has studied for many years, rating him the "best wildlife photographer." A big thrill came when Tommie wrote to Wolfe, and received an answer from the master photographer. Wolfe praised Tommie's eye-grabbing photograph and wrote: "What a wonderful photo. I wish I had taken it. Keep up the fine work."

However, Tommie's victory comes after many years of suffering and detachment from the SGI. "I went to all the conventions and I went to meetings, but I kept silent because I never really felt anything. I used to read experiences in the publications and see all those happy faces and wonder if I would ever feel like that."

For the persistence it took to pursue his dreams, Tommie gives credit to his family, especially to his mother, Koko Shaw. He only saw his father once after the family broke up when Tommie was very young. He remembers many times when they went hungry, but his mother refused to bend. She was a single mother who struggled to learn a new language and promote the SGI. Tommie credits his success to his mother's faith, her encouragement never to give up and to her confidence in President Ikeda's leadership.

"Mom is the best. She is a winner," Tommie said.

Mrs. Shaw glows with pride not only about Tommie, but all her children and grandchildren who were reunited last summer for the first time in many years. She said it is wonderful that “my Tommie” has achieved such a great benefit, but more important that he has developed appreciation for the SGI.

“My dream is to see kosen-rufu in Kentucky,” Mrs. Shaw said.

During high school, Tommie was bright but shy. He joined the Air Force and later married twice, both marriages ending in divorce. A third broken relationship also brought on a deep depression. When he recovered, his major consolation was his fascination with photography.

“I always knew I could succeed, I always knew I could do it.”

His sense of capability came to him after chanting many hours late into the night to understand what deep karma had made him suffer for so many years. He had an insight at one point during this extended time in front of the Gohonzon a few years ago that he was being told that “all would be well.”

“I cried like a baby. The tears just came and came, and I knew that my life would change.”

His job as a chef in the Benihana chain for nearly twenty years keeps him from participating in many activities. But now rather than sitting quietly, Tommie shares his struggles and victories with the members whenever he can.

“I was born into the practice—I had no choice. Now I want to show what things are possible if you stick with it. I owe so much to Mom and to President Ikeda’s guidance.”

Tommie is absorbing as much as he can about his art and wants to make it his full-time career. In fact, *absorbing* is a good word for his approach to photography. He says nature is full of peace and purpose, and that people can learn a lot from animals. With a practiced eye, he sees details shift in certain light from day to day. The challenge, he said, is to capture what he sees on film as he masters the technology required. The key for him is to acquire the patience to observe carefully, waiting for the right moment to take the photograph.

Tommie said one of the great photographers is President Ikeda himself. He was particularly struck by a photograph the SGI president took of a simple dragonfly years ago. Like his devotion to the members, Tommie thinks President Ikeda’s photographs are “truly wonderful, truly amazing.” □