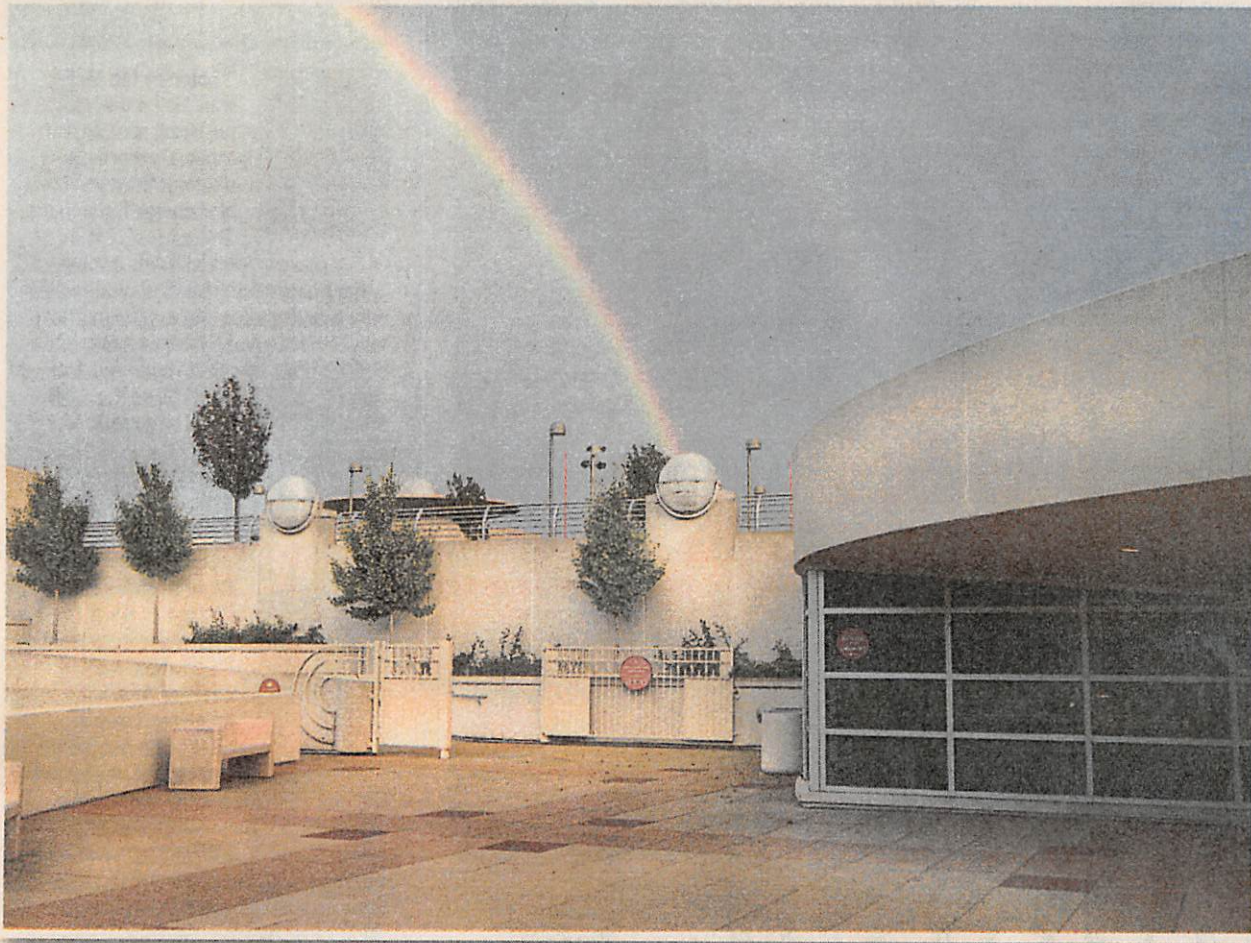


**ARTS** > "PHOTO TOWN!"



VICTOR FURMAN

**Above:** Tracy Madison, left, assists student photographer Larry Latham on the Monona Terrace during a VSA Wisconsin class last fall. Madison is a volunteer through the Center for Photography at Madison.

**Left:** Jennifer Sebranek captured a double rainbow in the blue-gray sky over Lake Monona.

# The big picture

Thanks to a VSA Wisconsin program, people with disabilities are able to take digital cameras and create works of art

**W**hen Larry Latham got his hands on a digital camera, he wanted to start snapping photos immediately. "He'd just take the camera and start shooting, shooting, shooting, shooting," said Alexis London, field services director for VSA Wisconsin, which works with people with disabilities. "That's part of his individual style; he likes to be in motion. He's a very active individual."

Latham is one of nine artists who began learning digital photography through a new program at VSA Wisconsin, produced in cooperation with the Center for Photography at Madison. A new show featuring their work will debut on Tuesday at Promega BioPharmaceutical Technology Center. (A separate show in the same space features wood carvings by Tom Schlenker.)

VSA Wisconsin changed its name for the third time on June 1 (formerly it was Very Special Arts, then VSA Arts of Wisconsin). Many of the people VSA serves have cognitive disabilities or developmental delays. Some need physical assistance as well.

"I think that we get so caught up in the label and the diagnosis that we lose sight of who that individual is," London said. "You or I may wear glasses — we need that extra tool, an intervention to help us see better. Somebody with a cognitive disability might need someone to support them more to achieve their goals, but ... in many different areas, they're just as capable."

VSA Wisconsin involves about 400 people in music, painting, drawing and mixed media classes. The photography course started last fall.

The idea came from Chris Spencer, an amateur photographer and employee of American Girl who volunteered at VSA's Art Fair on the Square booth in 2007. Spencer amassed funds from the "art team" at American Girl — a group responsible for placing art in the company building as well as arts-related outreach — and expertise from folks at CPM, where Spencer is a member.

## IF YOU GO

**What:** Photo Town!  
VSA Wisconsin artists

**Where:** Promega  
BioPharmaceutical  
Technology Center,  
5445 E. Cheryl Pkwy

**When:** Tuesday  
through Sept. 1;  
reception Tuesday,  
4:30-6:30 p.m. with a  
screening of "Shooting  
Beauty: Everyone  
Deserves A Shot" at  
6:45 p.m.

**Info:** vsawis.org

The group purchased discounted digital cameras from the Camera Company and had its first photo shoot on the roof of the Monona Terrace. At the first class, many of the volunteers were nervous. Some of the students were, too.

"Some people had never held a camera before," Spencer said. "There was a lot of tension. But within the first five minutes, we passed out the cameras and everyone just got excited. One of the participants just grabbed (the camera) and he wanted to go, like 'Let's go! I want to take pictures!'"

Some of the resulting images are surprising in a quiet kind of way. Jennifer Sebranek captured a double rainbow in the dark, blue-gray sky over Lake Monona. In a photo by Greg Sturm, Terrace architecture looks like a satellite about to take off, and Kathy Dyreson's image of clouds recalls a dragon, or maybe an alligator.

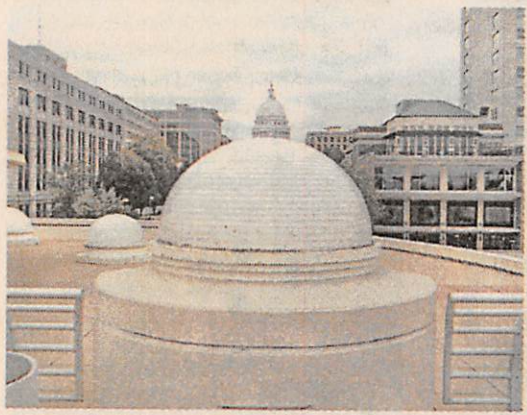
For students like Latham, volunteers tried to harness their energy and channel it in new ways. "We've used techniques to ... help him think more about composition," London said. "We've given him a monopod, which forces somebody to slow down a little bit."

In the second class, held this spring at the Jenny and Kyle Preserve in South Madison, seven of the eight students returned to learn more.

Teaching the students was "really rewarding," said Reece Donihi, a volunteer and president of CPM. "I think it's a matter of just doing the best job you can do and letting them respond the way they will, rather than having expectations."

VSA would like to offer the program every semester, but they will need to raise funds and look into more adaptive equipment to expand the class. "We had the idea to produce some kind of a book, which would document the program and show the photos," London said. "That's way down the road."

"Painting is great for some people but not for others," Spencer said. "In order to paint you have to be able to hold the brush, to move your arm and have it do what you want it to do. In photography, it can be as easy as pushing the button and you can capture what you see, what you want."



>> ED PARIS



>> KATHY DYRESON



>> GREG STURM