Tyrell Shaff: Insight Into Life Through the Lens of a Camera

For four years, Tyrell Shaff helped the Kalamazoo Central High School family see how he sees the world.

He was a fixture at sporting events, dances and concerts, spending hours taking pictures of the world around him.

“It lets me show the world what I see. I’m half blind. So, I capture things in my unique perspective.” Shaff said. “I use my right eye mostly to take photos. I love how that fascinates people.”

Shaff, 20, graduated from Kalamazoo Central in June. He is currently working on an internship at Bronson Methodist Hospital as part of a gap year, but he hopes to attend college next school year.

He was born in Belize, where he suffered a detached left retina as an infant. He lived in Belize until being adopted at age 12 by Dana and James Shaff.

“It was a struggle when I was little and lived in Belize,” he said. “They had these big books with magnifiers. No one knew how to help me until I came here where we have all of these resources.”

He initially enrolled in Kalamazoo Public Schools before switching districts for middle school, and eventually returning to KPS. Early in his education, he was placed in special education before staff realized, “I am more capable than they realized — other than my visual impairment. They put me in harder classes and I excelled.”

Kalamazoo Central has become a second home, where he can always count on a hug from Principal Valerie Boggan and a handshake from Assistant Principal Ajamian Gardner. “The teachers cheer me on. This district is a family and they’re always there for you. We’re a forever family.”

And as with any family, there’s always that one family member who chronicles family life with their trusty camera. That has been Shaff for the past four years. His road to photography began with his uncle giving him his first camera and some photography books.

When he was a freshman, he lobbied Boggan to become the official student photographer for the school and she gave him her blessing. During busy sports seasons, he estimates he’d spend 20 hours a week shooting events at the school. On a football game day, for example, he might shoot the pep rally, then attend the game to take photos, and then spend several hours editing after he got home.

In addition to support from his uncle Kenn Livingston, a professional photographer in Kalamazoo, Shaff worked closely with KC photography teacher Matthew Douglas. Community photographer Herbert Scott also gave him good advice on the sidelines of games.

Although he photographs everything from portraits to pep rallies to dance and choral concerts, his favorite subject is sports. He acknowledges that his passion for sports presents challenges with his impairment, but he’s trained himself through auditory cues and timing to capture the action on the field, the court, and the track.

“I can tell in my head when a person is going to take a step — and another step,” he said. “When they’re in motion I can estimate where they’re going and what they’re going to do next. Sometimes it can be a good estimate — sometimes it can be a bad estimate. I have to go over what I do in each game because it’s really time sensitive.

“Sports fascinate me, because you capture those moments that if you blink an eye — the person is already over there.”

Shaff said that he especially loves to capture the highlights of people’s days or their games — the happy moments.

One of his favorite photos shows his friend August O’Neill just after a baseball game.

“He was so happy after that win. He was like, ‘Hey, capture me!’” Shaff said. “He actually likes that one. He comments on my photos every single time. It motivates me to be more successful in what I do.”

Photography also gave Shaff a way to become a part of the school community.

“If you have a camera and go out and shoot, everybody knows you. You capture that memory they won’t forget about.”

He is also capturing memories that he’ll never forget — even after the day comes that he won’t be able to look at his old photos.

“The doctor says that one day I will probably lose my sight. I felt sad when I heard that. I don’t know when that day will be, but I hope that I live life to the fullest until then.

“You read stories about people with no legs at all who become swimmers. Those kinds of stories fascinate me. I think you want to live the best life possible. When I do go completely blind or whatever, I want to say I enjoyed my life while it lasted.”

“KPS will always be in my heart. It’s where my career started and my memories were made.”

Tyrell Shaff used photography to become an integral part of Kalamazoo Central.

Kalamazoo. Shaff worked closely with KC photography teacher Matthew Douglas. Community photographer Herbert Scott also gave him good advice on the sidelines of games.

The “Tyrell Shaff: Insight Into Life Through the Lens of a Camera” article was written by a staff writer for the Kalamazoo Public Schools district. The article highlights Shaff’s journey from adoption to photography and his impact on Kalamazoo Central High School. It features quotes from Shaff and his family, as well as photographs from his time at the school. The article emphasizes Shaff’s passion for photography and his ability to overcome challenges. It also highlights the support he received from his family and school staff. The article concludes with Shaff’s reflections on his experience at Kalamazoo Central and his future plans. The article was published in August 2021.