



AMERICAN  
**PHOTO**  
**ON CAMPUS**

DIGITAL SLR  
TUTORIAL

STUDENT  
PORTFOLIOS

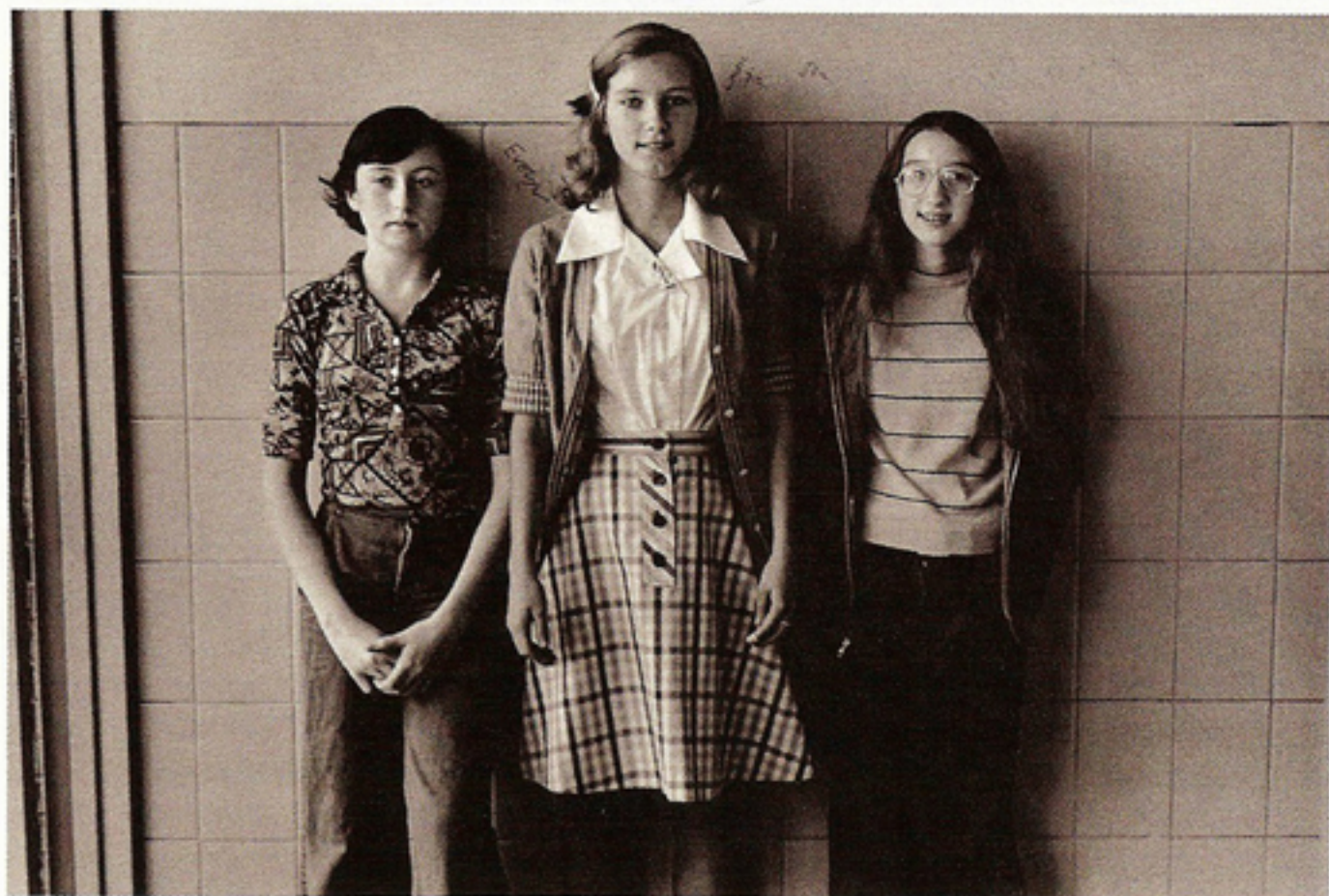
JANUARY  
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MENTOR:  
JOE  
SZABO'S  
HIGH  
SCHOOL  
DAYS

MASTER:  
**NICK  
VEDROS  
ON  
ART AND  
COMMERCE**



HOW JOE SZABO USED PHOTOGRAPHY TO REACH OUT TO HIS PUPILS AND TURNED HIS HIGH SCHOOL TEACHING EXPERIENCE INTO A DECADES-LONG DOCUMENTARY OF TEENAGE GROWING PAINS. BY LORRAINE CALVACCA



M E N T O R

## STUDENT BODIES

**D**iscipline and deference to authority defined Joseph Szabo's Catholic school education. He sat up straight and buckled down. Now a teacher at Manhattan's International Center of Photography and Nassau Community College, the photographer remembers his formative years in Toledo, Ohio, as well-ordered and "wonderful."

So when, after graduating from Pratt Institute, Szabo got his first full-time job teaching graphic arts at Long







Island's Malverne High School, he might as well have landed on the moon. "I was in shock," he says. It was 1972, and his students' ripped jeans, scraggly tentacles of hair, and flagrant cigarette and pot smoking created a sense of disorder that provoked a fight-or-flight response in him. "These were not the kids I knew in high school," says Szabo. "I didn't know if I could adjust. There was too much distance between us, and I was doing a lot of disciplining."

To bridge the gap between himself and his students, Szabo began to photograph them. He took pictures of students in the high school's hallways and classrooms, hanging out on suburban streets, making out at parties, and cutting up on nearby beaches. Using his camera as a tool for communication turned out to be a stunningly successful strategy. "Almost immediately, we started connecting," he recalls. "They would pose, I would laugh, they would laugh." What Szabo finally understood, he says, "was that these were great kids who were just more confused and less centered than I was. And I became a much better teacher because I was tuned in to their lives."

In 1978, Szabo published some of that work in *Almost Grown* (Harmony Books) and went on to teach for 21 more years at Malverne. Now, a quarter of a century later, he has come out with an extraor-

dinary sequel, called simply *Teenage* (Greybull Press/D.A.P., \$45). The book follows Malverne High students through the long, strange decades of the 1970s and 1980s, and shows that the more things change, the more teenage love, lust, and angst stay the same. Shot in a gritty, energetic black and white that evokes the raw emotion of adolescence, Szabo's subjects run the gamut from sad to euphoric, self-conscious to supremely confident. His images have an intimacy that belies the usual student-teacher relationship. The book opens with a high-school reminiscence by Cameron Crowe, writer of the cult classic *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*. Much like that tragicomic film, Szabo's photos contain their share of youthful clowning but never let the viewer forget how hard it is to be a teenager.

To Szabo's genuine surprise, his photographs of high school life seem to resonate with people of all ages and

This page and opposite: Photographs from Joe Szabo's book *Teenage*, shot during a 27-year teaching career at Long Island's Malverne High School.

## WIN A COPY OF JOE SZABO'S **TEENAGE**



Things may have been a bit different when you were in high school, but **Teenage**, by Joe Szabo (right), is sure to evoke memories of life before college. To win a copy of the photographer's new book, send a postcard with your name, address, phone number, and school affiliation to *American Photo On Campus*, 1633 Broadway, 43rd floor, New York, NY 10019. Be sure to write "Teenage" on your card. The deadline is March 31.

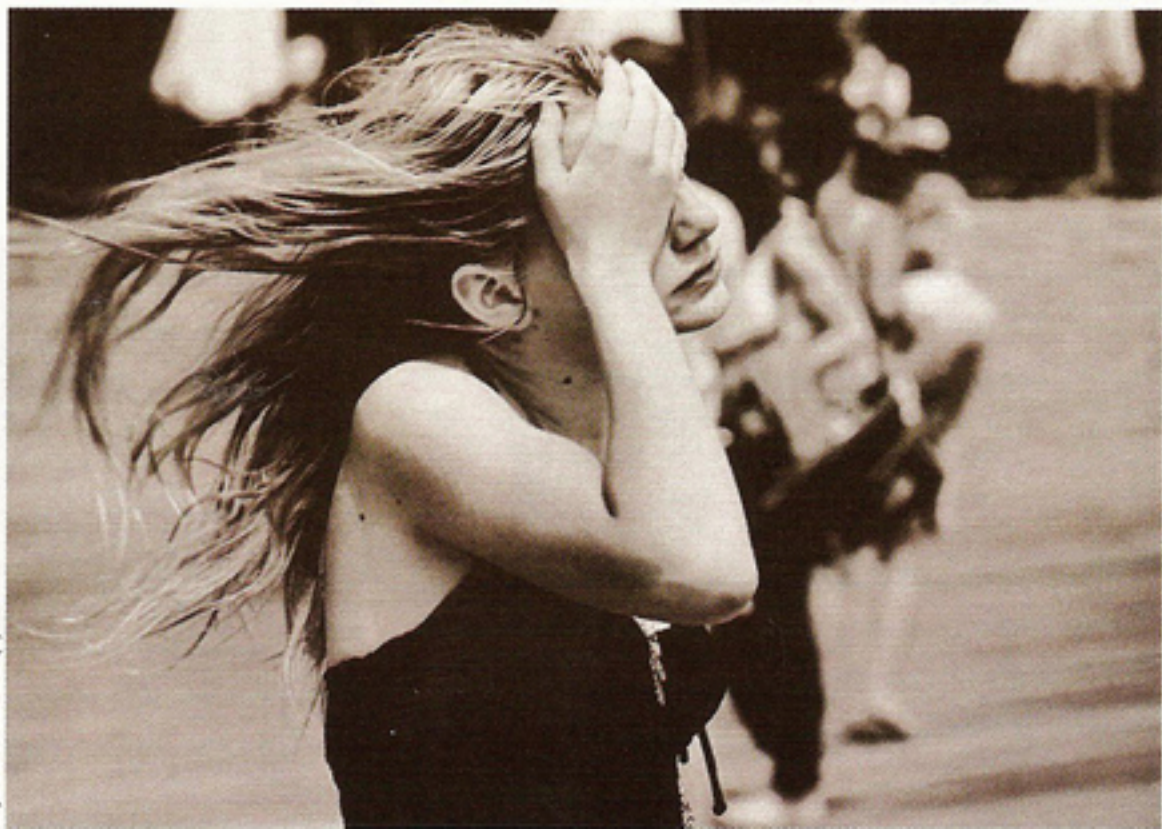






CRITIQUING STUDENT WORK IS A VERY DELICATE THING," SZABO SAYS. "I'VE LEARNED THAT YOU LOOK FOR THE ONE THING THAT'S EXCITING.

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backgrounds. Among those who have admired his work and bought his prints are fashion photographer Bruce Weber and film director Sophia Coppola. Coppola told the French magazine *Les Inrockuptibles* that Szabo's images provided "an absolute reference" when she was directing her first film, *The Virgin Suicides*, a disturbing account of the psyches of 1970s teenagers. "That was high praise," says the photographer.

Szabo is especially grateful for such praise, he says, at a time when negative feedback seems to be the vogue in art education. Throughout his career he has ruefully observed the practice of "tearing apart" aspiring photographers' work—including his own. Invited by a local college in the mid-1970s to talk about his growing teen portfolio, he was mortified by the student audience's mean-spirited comments. Szabo vowed that he would never allow that in his own classroom. "Critiquing student work is a very delicate thing," he says. "I will always find something good. I've learned that you look for the one thing that's exciting. It could be a beautiful line or the composition. And you say, 'Wow! I like how you saw that.'"

Like any good teacher, Szabo has applied the worst and the best of his own education and real-life experience to his classes. A seemingly obvious but powerful piece of advice about shooting people came early on from famed photojournalist and ICP founder Cornell Capa. "He told me, 'You have to like people, and you have to let them know you like them,'" says Szabo. "That

Szabo's gritty black-and-white scenes of adolescent life, from his new book, *Teenage*.



Szabo's subjects run the gamut from sad to euphoric, self-conscious to confident.

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© JOSEPH SZABO (2)

is especially helpful with teens." And from documentary photographer and former *Life* magazine regular Ken Heyman he learned to act "casual" in uncomfortable circumstances, by putting his camera down at first and then shooting objects in the room to put the people he really wanted to photograph at ease. That tactic has allowed him to blend in and get the pictures he wanted at gatherings of students outside school. Szabo also learned how to toe the thin line between intimacy and intrusion. "A photographer should get as close as the subject will allow," he says. "Beyond that point, it's exploitation."

**S**zabo is now focusing on a number of other long-term projects, including a 25-year documentation of sun worshippers at Long Island's Jones Beach and, more recently, a study of terminally ill residents at Christa House, a Long Island facility for "the dying poor" where he has volunteered during the last three years. Szabo says he is honored to keep his failing subjects company and to listen to them. He likes to give them framed and signed prints of their favorite things. "These are not people at their prettiest," he says. Their beauty, he explains, is in their honesty and willingness to be seen at a time when many people would prefer to stay out of sight. "Photography can be an instrument for understanding people you might not otherwise be around," he says. "It allows you to really look." ■

