AWARD

Sentinel photographer nabs honor

Kevin Johnson’s student portfolio recognized for excellence

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SANTA CRUZ — Ask a professional photographer what makes his or her job worth doing and the answer, like the photographs themselves, will inevitably vary in shade, size and detail from person to person.

The profession has been life-changing for part-time Sentinel photographer Kevin Johnson, who described himself as “unbelievably shy” and without occupation-related life goals before he stumbled on a Cabrillo College photojournalism class several years ago. On Sunday, Johnson’s work was recognized for its excellence at the 40th Annual News Photography and Video Competition awards banquet in Oakland.

Johnson’s entry of a 24-photo portfolio took second place in the competition’s student division.

“With photojournalism, you get to be in the rough of it and experience life a little bit more,” said Johnson in a recent interview about why he loves his profession. “When I have a camera in my hand, it gives me a reason to talk with people and interact with them.”

Conner Jay, president of event organizer San Francisco Bay Area Press Photographers Association, said a string of strong photojournalist student competitors have been coming out Johnson’s San Jose State University in recent years.

Conner commended Johnson’s grasp of visual narrative in an era when the photojournalism field calls for a grasp on a number of different digital subspecialties.

“They possess all these skills, but when you look at their work, they still have such an understanding ... of still elements,” Conner said. “It’s a timeless element ... (and) it’s refreshing that it’s still being carried on. They still can produce these great still images.”

Johnson, a 26-year-old lifelong Ben Lomond resident, will graduate from San Jose State University this month, majoring in journalism with an emphasis in photojournalism. For the annual San Francisco Bay Area Press Photographers Association competition, he submitted 24 of his photos, primarily taken for the Sentinel and covering everything from spot news and features to sports and portraits. His work merited the Luci S. Williams Houston Memorial Award, given by the association in memory of San Jose Mercury News photojournalist Luci S. Williams Houston, who was murdered in November 2001, according to the association’s website, sf-bappa.org.

Johnson credits his life’s current direction in photojournalism to fellow Sentinel photographer and former Cabrillo College instructor Shmuel Thaler, who “put a camera in my hands and his faith in me and I went for it” during a 2011 internship at the paper.

Clumps of sand fly into the air as triathletes sprint into the ocean at Main Beach during the annual Santa Cruz Triathlon.