

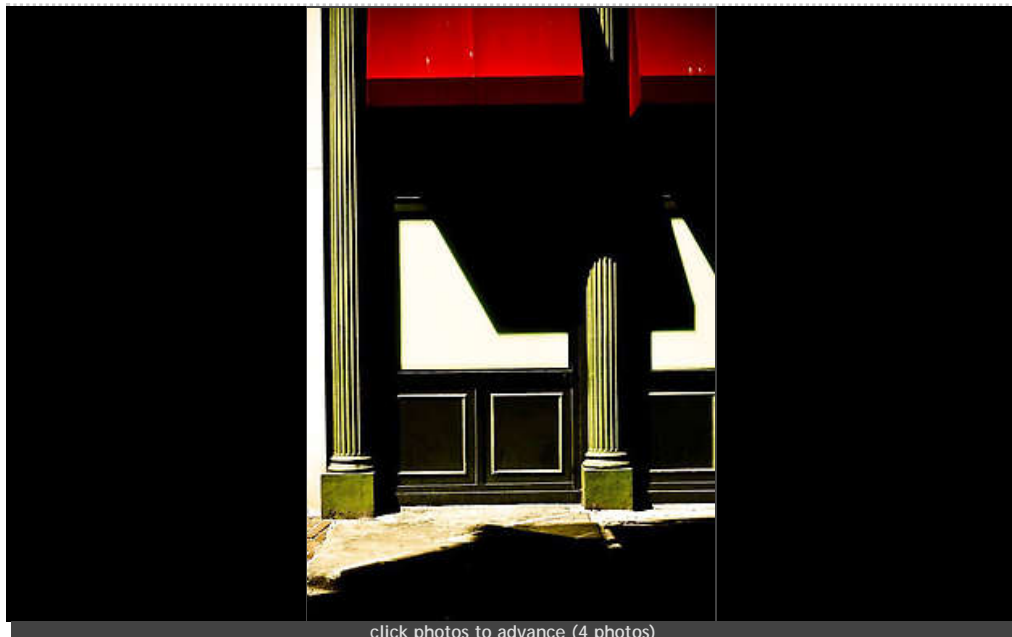
## 'The pictures give you some insight into his loneliness, and maybe his demons'

Fund set up in Michael McMullen's memory has raised \$10,000 — so far

By Jimmy Jenkins

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Michael McMullen's "Red Awning" was part of the recent show. Courtesy photo

BLOOMINGTON — Last week, Mary McMullen recalled how she began to deal with the tragic death of her son, Mikey.

"Within weeks of his death, we decided to create a fund with the IU Foundation, so that his name would live on through the arts, and in particular through his love — photography."

Early this spring, at the age of 24, Michael McMullen succumbed to a battle with mental illness. He took his own life in May. A once outgoing and gregarious, well-known Bloomington resident, within the past few years Mikey began to suffer from a sudden onset of social anxiety.

But before he departed, he discovered and flourished in the world of visual arts.

"Just as with music and sports, Mikey had a gift for photography," his mother said as she leafed through prints of pictures her son had taken in Boston. He was there a few years ago, studying at the New England School of Photography.

“When he went to Boston, that’s when it seemed to all come together for him,” Mary said of her son’s attempts to find his niche in life.

Mikey, the middle child of three boys, had first gone to college in Washington State, where he fell in love with the beauty of the Pacific Northwest and the Seattle music scene. Missing home, he moved back and enrolled at IU for his second year of school, before transferring one more time to the East Coast.

“In New England, he really found a home and thrived,” Mary said. Pictures Mikey took at this point in his life were recently featured in a show at the Lodge, in downtown Bloomington at Sixth and Walnut streets, titled “Urban Landscapes.”

“After Mikey passed away, we discovered this huge body of work that he left behind,” Mary said of the thousands of photographs her son had taken and developed over the years.

“We began by displaying them at the house for his wake, and when everyone seemed to enjoy them, we got the idea to have a show.”

Mikey’s photos reflect an artist who captured man’s strange grapple with existence. He was able to find the beauty in accidental, geometric miracles. He highlighted irony and the battle between nature and civilization. He employed a playful and dramatic use of color. His images convey a powerful solitude: skies are usually full of clouds, buildings crumble vacantly, chairs sit alone on the beach.

“I think the pictures give you some insight into his loneliness, and maybe his demons,” his mother said.

“A lot of his friends from Boston felt he had such a unique eye, remarking on his ability to capture pictures that other people might just walk by.”

With the help of Mikey’s close friend Yael Eban, who was the curator of “Urban Landscapes,” Mary and her husband Rick selected more than 30 pieces to be featured in the show.

## Community

“We were overwhelmed by the response of the community,” Mikey’s father said. “The opening of the exhibition of Mikey’s work was truly a celebration of his life.”

Lots of friends from IU, where Mary is an education professor, were in attendance, as well as old classmates from Bloomington High School North, Mikey's elementary school, old soccer teammates, former band mates and students with whom he had studied ballet.

"It was nice to see people making connections," Mary said. "It was nice to see how many lives he had touched."

Throughout the week it ran at the downtown artspace, "Urban Landscapes" drew hundreds of visitors and generated thousands of dollars that Mikey's parents put directly into the Michael McMullen Photography Fund.

### Helping others

The idea of raising the \$25,000 needed to establish a fund that awards scholarships and endowments was overwhelming, but the McMullens are making great progress. They have three years from the time they established the fund in October of 2010 to become fully funded, but Mary feels good about their chances: "Thanks to donations and people purchasing Mikey's prints at the show and online, we currently have around \$10,000," she said. "To be fully endowed, the fund needs \$25,000, at which point the foundation could award a scholarship to an undergrad or a fellowship to a graduate student each year – with the requirement being that the recipient is using photography in their creative work or research."

Mary said the family would be interested in having another show featuring Mikey's work sometime within the next year, providing they can find another space. They are also thinking about producing calendars of Mikey's urban and nature images that they could perhaps sell at local art fairs and venues. Their efforts are to raise money, but also awareness.

"Mental illness is just as serious as any other life-threatening disease," Mary said. She believes her son used the safety and comfort of the camera to deal with the world in which he struggled. She described the long and prohibitive intake processes at various local institutions where their family sought help: "There is inadequate mental health care here in Bloomington. Because Mikey looked and lived a certain way, I think a lot of people in the health care community dismissed

him as just another wayward young adult going through some sort of phase. When in fact, he did have a diagnosed, treatable mental illness.

“We believe he committed suicide because he felt helpless. We think maybe when faced with inadequate therapy and the prospect of living a life on prescription drugs that interfered with his ability to create art, he felt that he could no longer go on.”

He was “just such a great kid,” Mikey’s mother said.