

# Shooting to SUCCESS

**For 28 fifth-graders at Hawaiian Avenue Elementary School, using cameras to document their lives and community is a fun, safe project that helps show other people exactly what they see**

By **Mary Vuong**  
Daily Bruin Contributor

In a community where gangs, high school dropouts and pregnant teens have become all too common, over two dozen 10- and 11-year-olds are fighting back, shooting everyone and everything in sight.

With 27-exposure, disposable cameras, that is.

Conceived by Alina Bueno, a graduate student at the School of Public Health, "Shoot Back With Cameras - Not Guns" is a project designed to help students in low-income urban areas identify both negative and positive aspects of their community.

After receiving grant money, Bueno was able to provide cameras for a class of fifth-graders at Hawaiian Avenue Elementary School, located in Wilmington.

"These kids have really started to think about the consequences of their actions and also those of their community," Bueno said. "They realize that they're not alone, that the community together can be used as a strength."

"They have the power to change or improve things," she added.

Fran Brown, the class's teacher, said that for many of her students, English is their second language, and this project has been instrumental in building a variety of skills.

"In addition to taking pictures, they're also writing about them, so this project incorporates visual and language arts," Brown said. "Though they don't seem to be aware that they're building language skills - they're just having a lot of fun."

Brown brought the students to UCLA on Feb. 2, so that they could see the campus through the viewfinders of their cameras.

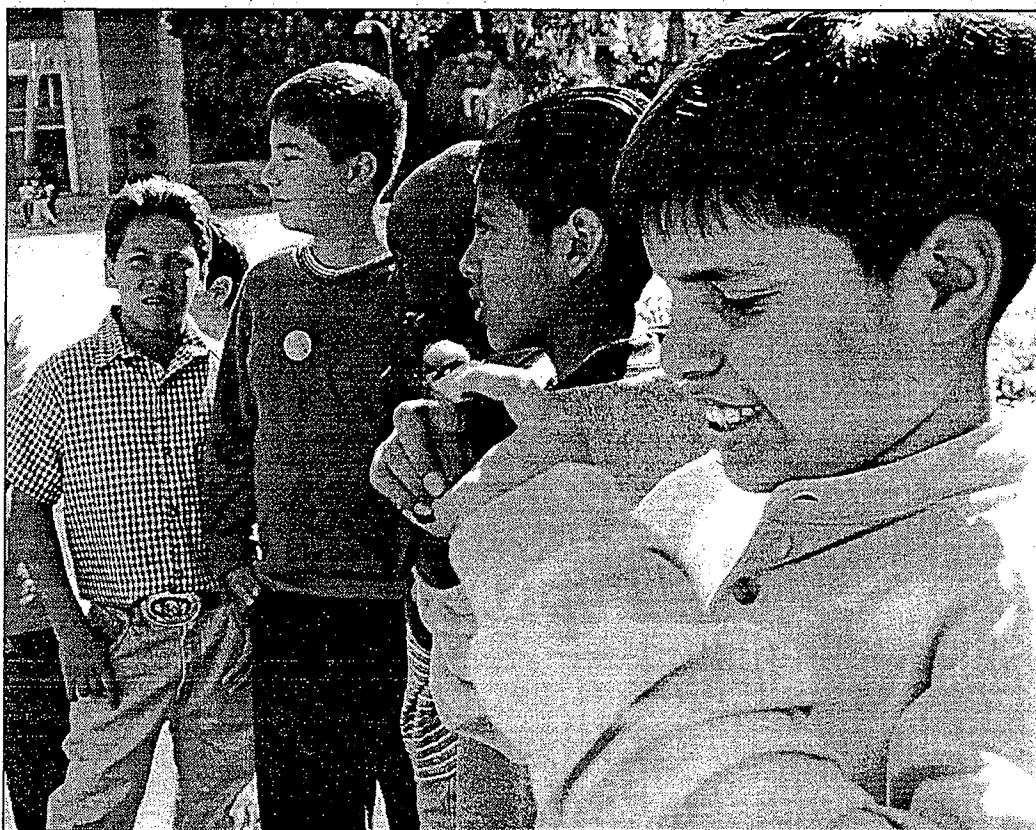
Bueno's mother is a teacher at the elementary school, which made it easier to carry out her plan. But she also chose the school for its specific area.

"I wanted to do the program in a lower income community, and Wilmington fits the bill. There's also gang activity, and some of the kids see drug dealers," Bueno said.

Since last September, Bueno has met with the children for an hour each week to prepare for the project.

"We talk about what's going on in their community, whether the kids themselves feel safe. And if kids are having these types of concerns, their parents must be too," Bueno said.

"The comments and responses they give are very intelligent; they know what's going on out



DAVID HILL

**Javier Ramos** (right), a fifth-grader from Hawaiian Avenue Elementary School, is one of the students who took part in "Shoot back with cameras - not guns." The project allows inner-city children to document their community.

there," she added.

During the weekly sessions, the students also devoted time to analyzing published photos from various newspapers and listened to lectures given by professional photographers.

And so just last month, the elementary school students became photojournalists.

With cameras in hand, the kids took pictures of their personal life, including loving families, adoring pets and an alarming amount of graffiti.

To the students, a picture showing graffiti in a park means that gangsters hang out there, which tells them that it is not a safe place to play, Bueno

## L.A. CHILDREN AT RISK

On a daily basis, children living in the city of Wilmington face problems such as poverty and language barriers.

- Wilmington is the southernmost community in Los Angeles County. It is a highly industrialized area near five oil refineries and the Port of Los Angeles.
- Over 60 percent of the city's population is Latino, and many are monolingual Spanish-speakers.
- 25-35 percent of these residents live below the federal poverty level.
- For children, the rate exceeds 50 percent.
- 94.5 percent of the students at Hawaiian Avenue Elementary School are Latino, and their primary language is Spanish.

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said.

"It makes me feel bad that gangsters graffiti because then people have to paint over it. But then the graffiti keeps coming back, so they keep having to paint over and over it," said Marisela Lomeli, one of the students involved in the project.

Last week, Bueno selected several of the photos and had the students discuss their importance.

"I made photocopies of the pictures that I felt had a story behind them, ones that I thought people who don't live in Wilmington would be curious about," Bueno said.

Within the next several months, the students will receive a second set of cameras, which will be used to document their community. Then each child will select a favorite picture, and write an essay that explains its significance and how it makes them feel.

Bueno said that policy-makers don't always live in the community they're trying to help, so when they make changes, they do it based on how they see things.

"This is a chance for them to see things the way the kids do. The students are supposed to report to the rest of L.A. what Wilmington is all about," she said.

"Photography is a communication tool that crosses all language barriers," she added.

As for the future, Bueno hopes to expand the program to other schools in the city, and make it last longer.

"I'd also like to have the students pick one specific problem that they've identified, then go forward with solving it. I want them to be proactive and more invested in their community," she said.

For these fifth-graders, this project has given them a chance to reflect about themselves and their community.

"It makes me mad that people are just messing up the communities with trash and graffiti," said Francisco Villa, one of the students.

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## CAMERA

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Fellow classmate Dolores Orozco, whose photos included trash on the streets and an abandoned building with rats, also agreed that these things are bad for the community.

But both students said that they had fun, and learned a lot.

"Many of these kids used to think that things like going to college or having a career are out of their reach. Now they are seeing things differently. This project has opened doors for them. It has built their self-esteem," Brown said.

"I want people to see this program and realize the power that children have, that they do realize what's going on. Hopefully this program will help these kids make positive choices in their lives," Bueno said.