

Lasting images

Wilmington schoolchildren use cameras for a year to picture a better life

By Sandy Cohen
STAFF WRITER

Marisela Lomeli is only 11 years old, but she understands there's a gang problem in her Wilmington neighborhood.

The fifth-grader has witnessed it firsthand: graffiti in the park and on buildings, trash and drug deals in the alleys near her home and vandalism of her school's property.

But Marisela has documented the problem — in photographs and essays — in an effort to spread the word.

In fact, all 27 students in Fran Brown's fifth-grade class at Hawaiian Avenue Elementary School in Wilmington have something to say about their neighborhood, even though they may not have realized it at first.

Since September, the students have been learning to think critically about their community, documenting their thoughts in

photos and words, as part of a special program called "Shoot Back With Cameras, Not Guns," designed by Torrance native and UCLA graduate student Alina Bueno.

A celebration at the school Wednesday marked the culmination of the yearlong program. Bueno and the fifth-graders hosted a photo exhibit and bilingual presentation for their parents and classmates, explaining their project and showing off the results.

"This allowed the students to reflect upon and discuss the consequences of their actions in the community," Bueno, 24, said to the group.

"In light of (the) violence in Colorado, kids need a creative and safe way of posi-



tively expressing what they feel. And these kids demonstrate great pride in their community."

The youngsters studied newspaper photos and were visited by photography experts in preparation for taking pictures.

Then each child was provided with two disposable cameras, 27 frames each, with which to document what they saw as the good and bad in Wilmington.

Choosing favorite images

Once all the film had been developed, each child chose a favorite photo or two and wrote short essays about the message behind each image.

They captured pictures of their families and their homes. They shot photos of graffiti in parks where they play and on the walls of markets where their parents shop. They photographed their mothers' cooking and their younger siblings and cousins out-

PHOTOS/B2



THOMAS MICHAEL ALLEMAN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Dolores JoAnna Orozco, right, shows off her pictures Wednesday to, from left, fifth-grade classmate Lauro Alvarez, visitors Martha Bill and Evie Hill, and teacher Elsa Herrera.

Hawaiian Avenue Principal Zan Colazas said Bueno's program allowed students to be reflective about their community while incorporating reading, writing and translation skills.

"It's a motivational project that provides them an opportunity to see things from another perspective," he said.

Close-knit community

Colazas added that Bueno's presence is another illustration of the close-knit community at the school and in Wilmington. After all, Bueno is the daughter of a long-time second-grade teacher at Hawaiian Avenue.

"So many things come to us because of our dedicated staff members," he said. "There's a personal connection at our school."

A point not lost on Bueno, who proudly said, "My whole family's here," as her sister snapped pictures at the event.

Now that the photos have been displayed at Hawaiian Avenue, the rest of the community will have a chance to see them. Beginning in May, the shots will be shown at the Los Angeles Public Library, Wilmington branch and at the Wilmington Municipal Building.

Bueno said she'd still like to expand the audience for the children's work and hopes to find a venue in Los Angeles, maybe even on the UCLA campus.

She'd also like to expand the reach of the program itself. Bueno is writing a report on the project at Hawaiian Avenue in an effort to find funding to implement the program in all five Wilmington elementary schools.

Students at Hawaiian Avenue said that's a great idea.

"I think it was fun and I got to take a lot of pictures," said Judith Montejano, 10.

"I actually want to go to UCLA and learn more about cameras so I could be a photographer. Also, when I grow up, I would like to see (Bueno) and tell her how much I learned from her."

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Photos

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side in the yard. They took pictures of their favorite friends and favorite toys. There were shots of trash-filled alleys and broken-down fences, contrasted with religious images and photos of the local church.

Lauro Alvarez, 11, selected a photo of a garbage-filled alley near his home as the most poignant of his 54 shots.

"I wish people would not throw trash in the alleys," he wrote in an essay. "I want people to have the alleys clean. This is by my house. I don't like it because there's gangs there."