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# SAN BERNARDINO: Children point cameras at their lives

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DAVID BAUMAN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

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BY MARK MUCKENFUSS | STAFF WRITER | February 01, 2013; 02:56 PM | [Comments \(](#)

0 )

Angel Lugo wants to hit home runs on the local ball field rather than the large open lawn between the apartment buildings in Waterman Gardens.

The subsidized housing complex in east San Bernardino has a ball field. But a photo taken by 11-year-old Angel

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shows a small, tilted backstop backed by trees and residences. The field in front of the backstop is brown.

"All these kids want to play but when they fall, they get all these thorns," Angel said, adding that there is also broken glass to contend with. "People don't even bother to water it. We want to clean it up and get new fences and make it better. We need that baseball field."



Angel's photo and some accompanying explanatory text were part of an exhibition last week of about two dozen photos taken by students in after-school programs at the Boys and Girls Club at Waterman Gardens, a World War II-era subsidized housing complex.

The students who participated in the photo project were given cameras, along with some instruction, and told to take pictures to show what they liked in their community and what they saw that needed to be changed. Some of the students said they felt it was a chance to bring attention to their neighborhood which they think has been neglected.

Many of the resulting photos focused on trash and graffiti. There also were images of flowers, animals and the reflective front of an office building showing a cloud-strewn sky.

The project was initiated by a group of Cal State San Bernardino psychology students led by Professor David Chavez. The university students have been working as volunteers at the Boys and Girls Club for about a year and a half, mostly in the role of tutors and mentors, Chavez said.

"They provide for a great link between these kids and a possible future that they see for themselves," he said. "Part of what we're trying to do is create a bridge between this community of Waterman Gardens and Cal State San Bernardino, or any university."

The photography assignment is part of a study to gauge changes in the boys' and girls' feelings of empowerment. Questionnaires given to them before starting their photography showed that they feel forgotten, Chavez said.

"They feel the conditions of their community are more run down because the community at large doesn't care about it," he said. The photo project "is a way for these kids to start making a difference in their own lives by advocating."

## PICTURES AND WORDS

The students were asked to write about various aspects of their images, such as how the scene related to their lives, how it might be used to educate people and what they, as kids, could do about the problems they identified.

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Huy Ngo, 12, took the photo of the reflective office buildings. He said the image, with the clouds floating across the windows, made him think of freedom. But it also made him think about the limitations he sees.

"In a quarter of the state," he said, referring to his community, "it's all messy. And in the other part, it's all clean and stuff."

He said he hoped his photo might make people who could make a difference think about that.

"They could like change and help it," he said, admitting he wasn't optimistic. "People aren't really going to care that much."

But some students said they had seen some change. They, or their parents, had called the Waterman Gardens management office about some of the problems they had spotted. At least some had been addressed.

Ana Gamiz is a spokeswoman for the San Bernardino County Housing Authority, which oversees the housing complex. She said the project had made an impact and may continue to do so. She saw some photos that concerned her when she attended the show at the Boys and Girls Club.

"I made notes to come back and ask if some of those things had been addressed," she said.

She also plans to solicit comments from the kids on the plans for renovating Waterman Gardens, plans that have been in the works for about 18 months and will eventually result in the complete rebuilding of the 70-year-old community. Officials hope to break ground in 2014.

"We have gone through a series of meetings for feedback and input," Gamiz said. "It would be a good idea to show these young kids the plans and see what they think so they can also provide their feedback."

## BUILDING BRIDGES

Marlene Zaragoza, 22, of Rialto, is one of the Cal State students who worked with the kids on the photography project. She said she was surprised by how insightful they proved to be.

"I would think, 'Oh, what is this a picture of?'" Zaragoza said. "But the responses they would bring would be very impressive. They took a picture of a dog. I was like, 'How was this going to change your environment?' They said, 'We need dogs because they help protect us. We shouldn't have to pay for them because they protect us.'"

As she spent time with the students, she found herself pulled into the community.

"Working with them for so long, you get to know them at a much deeper level and understand their community a little bit more," she said. "You see this is how people live in some places. It gave me more awareness."

And an attachment as well. Zaragoza said she plans to graduate in the spring with a degree in psychology, then work for a year before applying to graduate school. She plans to remain involved with the Boys and Girls Club.

Elizabeth Rodriguez, 22, of San Bernardino, graduated from Cal State San Bernardino last June and is still volunteering at the center.

"I think they need something constant in their lives, and that's what all of us give them," Rodriguez said.

Even though she grew up in San Bernardino, she had never been to Waterman Gardens. She lives near the Cal State campus.

"It's a totally different community," she said of Waterman Gardens. "It was very eye-opening."

In a discussion with the kids about a photo showing discarded beer bottles, Rodriguez said, "they started talking about hard drugs. I wasn't even aware of drugs like that when I was their age. Some of them are in elementary school. It was really crazy for me to hear that."

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The connection with college students provides an important link for the kids, she added.

"They know that if they stay focused they can change their lives," she said. "I think we just need to keep encouraging them."

Psychology professor Chavez said some of the students are getting that message. One photo that did not make it into the exhibit – the kids chose which of their photos would be displayed – was of a volunteer wearing a Cal State San Bernardino T-shirt, a required outfit for the college students working there.

"The title of that particular picture," Chavez said, "was, 'My Ticket Out.'"

He said he plans to have his students do another photo project with the children at the center. But first, he wants to finish the assessment of the current group.

"We noticed the kids' sense of empowerment," he said. "We think we'll see growth in that area."

How they might exercise that remains to be seen.

"The photos," he said, "are the beginning."

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