

Marin Independent Journal (San Rafael, CA)

November 1, 2005

Section:

Marin Independent Journal

Paul Liberatore: Immigrants touch town with exhibit

Paul Liberatore

IN THE photography exhibit "Who Opens the Doors of the Town in the Morning?" there is a photo of Steve Costa, owner of Point Reyes Books, joyfully washing the windows of his shop. When Costa saw the picture of himself for the first time, he was suddenly, emotionally, overwhelmed.

"I was really moved," he said one recent morning, standing behind the counter of his store. "Tears came to my eyes. The show captures a moment in time in this town, and makes a statement about how this town is alive and breathing every day."

"Who Opens the Doors of the TownÉ" includes photographs of shopkeepers, sheriff's deputies, a tourist in bike-riding Spandex, the people who work on the ranches, in the bakery, the restaurants, the medical clinic, the fire department, the newspaper, the radio station.

What is most remarkable about the exhibit, which opened in Gallery Route One in Point Reyes Station this week, is that it's not the work of professional photographers.

The black-and-white photographs were taken by eight Mexican immigrants who work or live on West Marin ranches, speak little English, and came together through the Marin Literacy Project.

None of them had any real instruction with a camera until they began a weekly photography class with Colombian-born photojournalist Elena Luz Castro of Mill Valley.

She taught them to look inside the lives and the work of their subjects, to take photos that are, in her words, "more natural," that capture "a history of a situation." In the end, she wanted them to have a different view of the world through the lens of a camera.

But the larger goal of the 10-month project - funded by the Marin Community Foundation and individual contributions - is to bring together the Hispanic laborers and the established white society, two disparate cultures that coexist in Point Reyes Station. Both are essential to the rural, small-town economy, but tend to go along on parallel paths in a kind of de facto segregation.

"It's a big deal to have events where Latinos and Anglos come together," said Nancy Bertelsen, the project coordinator. "It doesn't happen all that often. But we felt the arts and culture would serve to connect us through the creative process."

The photo students, all from the Mexican state of Jalisco, seem to express the common feeling that they were outside mainstream Marin society, mute and invisible, fearful of calling attention to themselves.

"Before, I was afraid to talk to people in town," said Juanita Diaz, 26, a bed and breakfast worker, who along with others spoke through an interpreter. "I just came to town to work. Now, when I go to the bank and the bakery, people say hi, or they pose. I'm more open with people."

"There wasn't much awareness of the Latino community before," added Beatriz Macias, 24. "Now there's more. It's important that you take the Latinos as part of this town."

On an artistic level, the photographs speak for themselves.

"I've been a professional photographer for 22 years, but I was pretty humbled by their work," said Steve Brock of Inverness, who volunteered to print the photos and mat and frame them for the show. "Here are these novice photographers with point-and-shoot cameras doing this great work."

As part of the class, the students took a field trip to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art to see an exhibit by contemporary German photographer Andreas Gursky, who is known for sharp social commentary through photos of apartment houses and hotel lobbies and what are thought of as mundane commercial subjects.

Gursky inspired a photograph of a rustic barn taken by 24-year-old Serapio Diaz, who works on a ranch feeding cows and had never looked at a barn as anything more than a place to store hay.

"I realized that you can make a landscape something bigger," he said. "I saw that a barn is an object, but it's also part of a landscape."

Ramon Ramirez, 44, would come to the photography class after working all night milking cows. He has several photos in the show, and was praised by Castro for his "sharp eye for the right moment."

That talent is evident in his delightful picture of a smiling local woman in front of a flower stand. It's titled "Alegria," meaning happiness.

"When I saw the pictures in the museum, I saw that photography was important," he said. "I had been involved with photography as a hobby and had one camera at home. Now I have five cameras with film in each one. I enjoyed this work. It's very different from working with the cows."



Photo: CLASS TIME: **Luz Elena Castro** (center) teaches a photography class at Gallery Route One in Point Reyes Station. The gallery is featuring a selection of work from students entitled 'Who Opens the Doors of the Town in the Morning.'

(c) 2005 Marin Independent Journal. All rights reserved. Reproduced with the permission of Media NewsGroup, Inc. by NewsBank, Inc.