CAPTURING OAKLAND'S CHARACTER IN 72 PAGES



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n 1979, a 29-year-old former design professor – transplanted to the Bay Area from Brooklyn, New York – mailed a letter to 100 local nonprofit and public sector organizations, explaining her desire to produce creative, effective communications materials to help them fulfill their missions. Eldridge Gonaway, director of Oakland's Office of Community Development, invited the young woman to make a pitch. Fern Tiger proposed a photoillustrated documentation along with highlights from interviews illuminating what the real people of Oakland's seven community development districts were doing for themselves to improve their neighborhoods. This celebration of grassroots community activity and civic participation became *Oakland 1979*, the first project of Fern Tiger Associates (FTA).

The project was all-consuming, involving day-andnight documentation of the activities, people, and energy of these communities, where 80% of Oakland's residents lived, and which the federal government had deemed in need of "development." On the street, in small businesses, at community meetings, festivals, protests, and in their homes, residents throughout Oakland were photographed and interviewed. Their perspectives and stories were woven into a tale that came to life entirely through images and quotations from people on the ground, quietly making a difference in the lives of their communities.

Roughly 15 years after the publication of Oakland 1979 and the inception of Fern Tiger Associates, the firm hired a young college student from Oakland to assist with administrative tasks. Seeing Oakland 1979 lying on a desk, she announced that her mother had a copy of the publication on their coffee table. "My mom has had it for years. She's always showing people the picture of me in it from when I was 5 years old," she said.



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A n unstoppable momentum fueled the project, resulting in the interviews of more than 150 fascinating and inspiring residents and more than 250 rolls of black-and-white film (9,000 images) shot over the course of one year.

Soon, Fern realized the story of Oakland's community development districts required much more than the 24 pages she initially proposed to the city for publication. With boxes of proof sheets and stacks of transcribed interviews in hand, she returned to Gonaway's office.

"I can't do it in 24 pages," she said. "I won't charge you any more, but it needs to be at least 72 pages." Gonaway agreed, signing off on the project. His untimely death in a car accident prevented his ever seeing the final product, a book dedicated to his memory. Ten thousand copies of Oakland 1979 were distributed to local libraries, schools, neighborhood organizations, and individuals, and the legacy of local people's passion was preserved for future generations. Months after the book had been published, Fern would receive calls telling her of local activities, and she responded by continuing to photograph many of these events and movements, an effort that nurtured lasting friendships and exhibited a dogged commitment to social documentation and to the framing of complex public policy issues in understandable, graphic ways to help organizations maintain their support within communities.



OAKLAND'S OFFICE OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT coordinates programs and federal funding in seven districts: West Oakland, North Oakland, Chinatown and Central Oakland, San Antonio, Fruitvale, Central East Oakland, and Elmhurst.

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"When I grow up I'm gonna clean up all of Oakland and see that it stays clean . . . and we'll help." Tyrone and friends



it they have a about it in th

ent has meant tearing down a lot "Chinese people were not aware they could fight for their rights: they didn't know how; I



think we sold out to all this development." "Most of us in the Chinatown neighborhood don't go out and really fight for things. We just live here: we're content with what we've got an we don't demand a lot of change. I think these demands come from outside our community." "We got all these bilingual street signs, but 1 don't even know if anyone notices them." ething about it in the the district and m our encouragement and support. I 't try to make them feel they have to ir total endorsement or approval in ing, because I don't think that ardly any more residences in We've been kicked out by the vey College, BART, Hong Kong ore residen

don't even know if anyone notices them." "A lot of people in the Bay Area don't know our Chinatown exists. They all know about San Francisco's Chinatown... but we have 3 fortun cookle factories, drescurs and the state of the series factories, groceny stores and bakeries. We are not a tourist center and that's good, because our shops serve our community." out San we 3 fortune

d has a lot of things going for it — for one, available space, and the ics of the area. It is a central place for commerce." "Something near is bappening here on San Pablo and in this old downtown area. People say: 'Oh San Pablo will never change." We're fighting this negativism ... because we know it can change."

think there have been vigorous chang ree in the district and that it is the ongest community in the city. This is idenced by growth on all levels . . . and :t that the people are willing to spend oney to upgrade the area." "I think

Oakland 19 "Maybe I'm a dreamer . . . but I believe that people really do have power."

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