

CAPTURING OAKLAND'S CHARACTER IN 72 PAGES



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In 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 photo-illustrated 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-and-night 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.



An 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.*



