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## Angels Gate center uses personal histories to unite community

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LAWRENCE K. HO, LOS ANGELES TIMES

Hard hats collected from retired workers are featured in the exhibit at the Angels Gate Cultural Center.

BY NITA LELYVELD

October 6, 2014, 8:25 p.m.

People, however different, should try to understand one another, figure out what they have in common, come together and learn.

That is the ethos of Angels Gate Cultural Center, housed in former military barracks on a San Pedro bluff.

The center for years has offered local artists studio and exhibit space inside its pale yellow buildings. It also has opened its arms wide in recent months to another slice of the community whom many see daily without really seeing.

From its perch in Angels Gate Park, the center overlooks the brightly colored cranes and containers of the Port of Los Angeles. In its gallery space, alongside works of art, it now is celebrating the labor of port workers.

Isabelle Lutterodt, the center's director of visual arts, says that when shaping new displays, she asks herself: "How do you connect people in a community?" She looks for ways, subtle but powerful, to emphasize shared experience.

In February, the center opened a tribute to the workers who build and repair the port's bridges, docks and breakwaters. To create "Supporting Structures," Fausto Fernandez, an artist from Texas, worked with members of the Southwest Regional Council of Carpenters and the Pile Drivers, Bridge, Dock and Wharf Builders Union, Local 2375.

They framed a long table out of metal with an image of the Vincent Thomas Bridge on its wooden top. They crammed its base with tools of the pile drivers' trade — a pontoon, thick rope and a shackle from a barge.

Pile drivers' hard hats — chipped, scratched and gouged — hang in rows on two walls. Many are personalized with stickers (American flags, "Working Hard, Living Poor") and each bears a tag identifying its owner: "Steve 'Spyder' Robinson, 34 years, pile driver, water work."

On blackboard surfaces, in neon ink, visitors have left messages:

"We're proud of you, Daddy!" "Pile drivers rule!" "Solidarity Forever." "Thanks for your hard work."

Collaborating with the nonprofit advocacy group Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy, the center recently opened a second port-themed community exhibit, about a female truck driver.

Called "Solitude to Solidarity: A Journey of Our Collective Consciousness," the display centers on a video in which Beatriz Rios-Nava speaks. Of her family's journey from Mexico to America. Of her series of previous jobs sewing, working at a plastics plant, churning out Chinese almond cookies and tending to people who broke her heart at a convalescent home. Of her decision to try something new and her great pride in passing her truck driving exams and getting her license.

The 57-year-old describes how, over time, she became an activist who fought for union representation. She shares the pleasures she finds in her working life, which she chronicles with cellphone photos. As Rios-Nava speaks, the images flit by: her morning pastry in the cab of her big rig and her friends on a picket line.

The video plays in a room in which an assortment of photographs hang from wires on the walls, selfies taken by locals who were asked to share bits of their own stories.

The photos hang loosely from a wire, so that people can touch them and easily flip them over. On the back of each is the subject's description of what it meant.

One older woman smiling out from beneath a straw hat details recent struggles, losing her husband and fighting breast cancer. "But I'm moving on with life," she says, "and enjoying every minute of it."

A young woman posing beside flowers and a chain-link fence reveals her desire to one day be a nurse practitioner: "To live my dream means to me that I wake up every day with a goal, a goal I plan to achieve."

Visitors are encouraged to enter a booth in the next room to record their own video stories. In a space set up like a cozy living room, the community's personal tales play on a TV screen.

Lutterodt hopes such "call and response" builds common ground.

On the day her video first played at the center, Rios-Nava joined a crowd of artists and port workers touring the various galleries.

She listened to Bill Myers, 73, a retired pile driver in a yellow hard hat, describe his often dangerous work. She took in Sergio Teran's drawings of friends and family members posing in lucha libre wrestling masks. When they put them on, he said, some grew fierce, some danced. Donning the masks seemed to free them.

She beamed as a crowd watched her in her video, describing how the huge scale of the port "makes me feel like a tiny ant, but also part of something big."

She felt a part of something big too, she said, at Angels Gate.

"We all are doing our work and telling our stories — with passion, so much passion."

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