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Picturing a homeless woman's world



Woman with Hand on Heart Trying to Find Hope in Homelessness by Susan Ekland

It's been nearly 18 months since nine homeless women picked up cameras and set out to tell the stories of their world. From Santa Monica to Skid Row, the women captured striking images: A street-weathered face against a backdrop of palm trees. Haunting yet hopeful interiors decorated with stuffed toys. A Ferris wheel turning under a blue sky as a hand grips a cigarette in the foreground.

The project, under the auspices of [Venice Arts](#) in collaboration with the [Ocean Park Community Center](#), came to be called "Got Caught Up Out There." (See gallery of selected photographs below.)

For some of the women, the experience was transformative. Two have enrolled in Santa Monica College. Among the others, there's been a reunion with a long-lost friend, a volunteer job, a relocation to Hawaii.

One of the college students, Althea Anderson, is pursuing a career in photojournalism. The other, Rita Elzy, aspires to a master's degree in fine arts. "My vision is to work with the special needs population," says Elzy, 57, who at one time was sleeping in a car in Beverly Hills.

"It was fabulous," she says of the experience. "We were working with professional people. The equipment we used was state of the art. It was just a great way to tell a story."

Like Elzy, all but two of the women are now in apartments or other housing and receiving services.

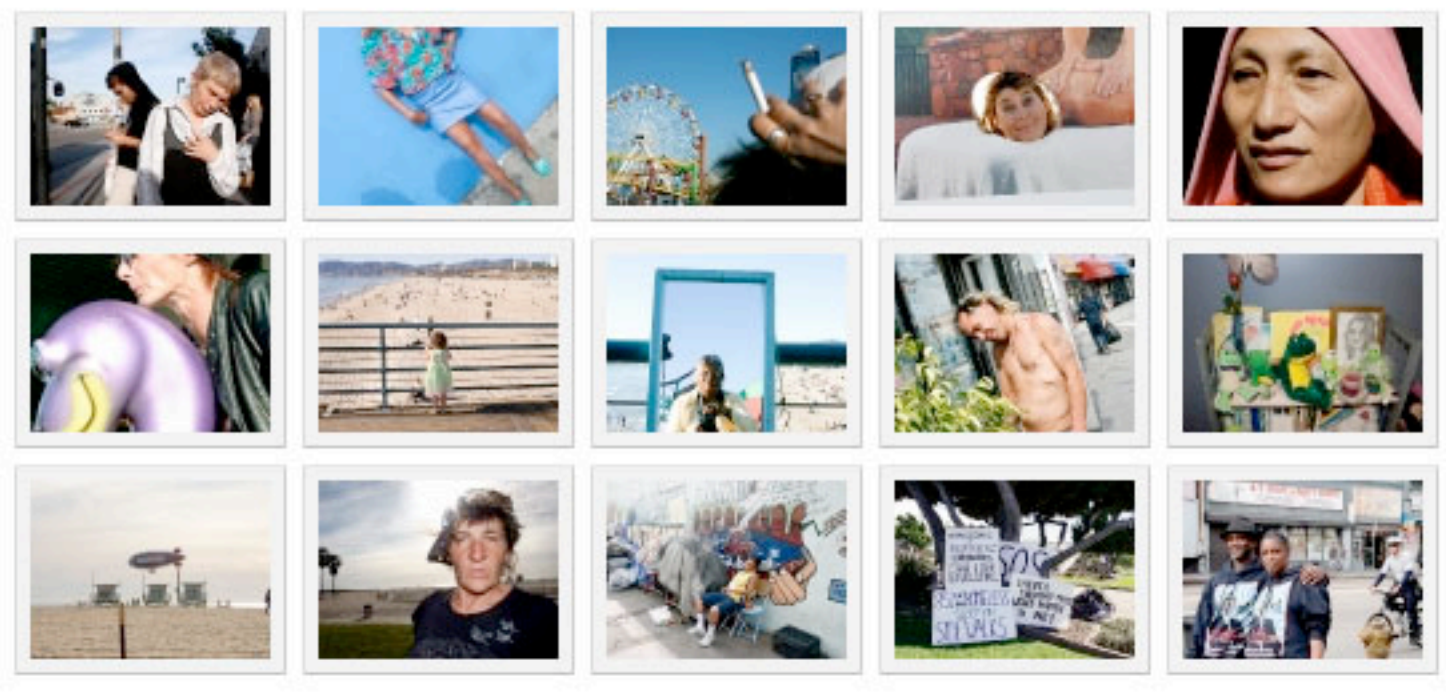
Even those who've drifted away took something meaningful from the 10-week photo workshop, says Amy Turk, project director of OPCC'S [Daybreak](#) program for homeless women with long-term mental illness. "I think it was maybe one of the most professional opportunities they had had for a while."

Photojournalist Jim Hubbard, creative director at Venice Arts, ran the program with photographers Giselle Macfarlane and Maya Myers. The project received funding from the county Arts Commission.

Hubbard called the participants "an incredible group of women" who brought depth and humor to their work. "Instead of being depressing," he says, "this was one of the most entertaining projects I've ever worked on."

The women's photos, which can be [viewed online](#), have been featured at the Venice Arts Gallery and the Sam Francis Gallery at Crossroads School. They also were showcased in a limited edition book that includes quotes from some of the women, including Althea Anderson, who says: "I feel like I got my self-esteem back."

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