

Allen: Alice Street Mural reflects historic neighborhood



By **ANNALEE ALLEN** | MediaNews

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Last week, I attended the ribbon-cutting of Phase I of an impressive new art project, the Alice Street Mural, which covers three formerly heavily tagged and graffiti-laden side walls of buildings adjacent to a parking lot at Alice and 14th streets.

The new mural is the work of an Oakland-based nonprofit, The Community Rejuvenation Project. The colorful design incorporates historical figures and events that represent “a fusion of the past, present and future communities of this particular neighborhood,” organizers say.

The organization’s executive director is Desi Mundo, who also is one of the artists. Also participating in the mural’s creation was Pancho Peskador. Twenty-five days of time-lapse videography, coordinated by filmmaker Spencer Wilkinson, took place in July when the mural was being painted. Wilkinson also taped the many community meetings and performances at the nearby Malonga Casquelourd Center for the Arts over the monthslong planning that led up to the final product.

Mundo and Peskador recognized that this is an important intersection at the heart of Oakland’s downtown, where links between African-American artists (at the Malonga) cross paths with elderly Chinese residents in the nearby Hotel Oakland.

Funding came from many sources, including a successful Indiegogo crowdfunding campaign, matched by a grant from the city’s Cultural Funding Program. More fundraising will be needed to complete Phase 2 of the mural, a continuation of a still-tagged fourth wall facing the parking lot where more historical images are being planned.

Both the Malonga Casquelourd Center for the Arts, built in 1928 and the Hotel Oakland, built in 1912, are local historical landmarks that have been adapted to new uses. The arts center started out as the Oakland Women’s City Club and was home to a number of women’s clubs and associations. History files describe the era leading up to the club’s opening the 1920s as the time following women successfully gaining the right to vote. The Hotel Oakland opened soon after the 1906 earthquake, when San Francisco was still rebuilding and Oakland was experiencing an economic boom.

By the 1990s, these two somewhat rundown buildings successfully gained new life with new functions and purpose.

The Alice Street Mural is made up of many individual portraits and elements, including Roy Chan, who for the past several years has been interviewing residents of the district for his Chinatown Oral History Project. Jerri Lange, a longtime Bay Area TV broadcaster, producer and print journalist, gave remarks at the ribbon-cutting event that were among the highlights for me. Lange lives in the neighborhood, further down on Alice Street in another of the landmark 1920s apartment buildings.

We met a few days later in the little cafe at the Malonga so I could learn more about her childhood in West Oakland, her parents, their work ethic, and her early love of learning.

Her long life is reflected in her autobiography, “Jerri: A Black Woman’s Life in the Media,” which I haven’t been able to put down since she gave me a copy. Proud to be a third-generation Oakland resident, Lange describes a West Oakland where Greeks, Chinese, Japanese, Portuguese, Irish and African-Americans lived side by side because it was where newcomers could find affordable housing, and their children could attend established schools. Strong friendships were formed, and a sense of community and pride was the guiding force, Lange says. “We all loved playing at DeFremery Park,” she adds.

Phase 2 of the project is scheduled to begin next month. A block party and community celebration featuring live music and dance will be held at the completion. For more information, go to the Community Rejuvenation Project homepage, www.crpbayarea.org, or follow the Alice Street Mural Project at Facebook.com/AliceStreetMural.

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