

Pictures worth a thousand words: Latina 'Women of Conscience'

Evy Warshawski Dec 2, 2015 0



Submitted photo

Victoria Alvarado will be at the Napa Library on Friday, Dec. 11, to introduce her book and show "Women of Conscience."

During December, stunning black-and-white photographs of California-based Latina female leaders — photographed by Victoria Alvarado — will grace the Napa County downtown, main branch walls for “Art in the Library.”

The public is invited to attend a free exhibit reception on Friday, Dec. 11, at 6 p.m. with an art talk by Alvarado’s friend, colleague and art historian, Darwin Marable, Ph.D. The reception will include light refreshments and is sponsored by the Napa County Library Foundation and the Napa County Hispanic Network.

Due to limited wall space, the library’s exhibit will include 32 of Alvarado’s photos of Latina “movers and shakers” from central and Northern California cities representing a broad spectrum of interests and specialties.

A sampling: Isabel Allende, author; Carmen Castellano, philanthropist; Lucha Corpi, poet and novelist; Gloria Flores-Garcia, health promoter; Lorraine Garcia-Nakata, artist; Dolores Huerta, farmworkers advocate; Arabella Martinez, community developer; Frances Morales, student advocate; Elba Rosario Sanchez, poet and educator; Olga C. Talamente, civil rights advocate; and Napa’s own Teresa Foster, immigration lawyer and community activist.

“The sense of being bicultural has always been close to my heart,” the Oakland-based, 78-year-old Alvarado reveals in the preface of her self-published/authored coffee table book, “Mujeras de Conciencia,” which encompasses the collection of all 72 photos with complementing bios in English and Spanish. (The book will be available for sale at the reception.)

“Side-by-side different perspectives have been constantly in motion within me, weaving into one enlarged self,” she continues. “Parents from Mexico and Central America, ancestors from ‘Alta California,’ and native California roots created a rich background that formed values, sensibilities and visions. Having parents who were activists in the struggles of San Francisco’s labor unions during 1940s and 1950s provided an added gift of the sense of community and the value of activism. These were early lessons in my youth.”

Alvarado came to photography late in life. A graduate of UC Berkeley (majoring in psychology) and Cal State, East Bay (majoring in educational psychology), her professional life has included jobs as director of public schools programs and project manager for California’s Department of Health Services. In the late 1960s, her husband, photographer John Spence Weir — who holds an MA in photography and was a student of internationally known photographer and educator

Jack Welpott — founded the Visual Dialogue Foundation (VDF) at San Francisco State long before photography was considered a fine art.

“Victoria attended many VDF meetings held at their home where discussions were held,” Marable shared, “and she was a keen observer when she decided to do the Latina women project in early 2000. She took a couple of photo classes to learn darkroom techniques. Was she influenced by her husband? How could she not be?”

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On her own dime and taking time away from work, Alvarado traveled up and down California for two years to capture 35mm images of Latinas whose knowledge and efforts have affected the well-being of Latino communities. To begin, she contacted a few women in the Bay Area, but word of the project spread and ladies began asking “Can I be in your book?” Alvarado said.

“Each photograph is unique,” Marable explained, “and while photographs are considered documents of events, through Alvarado’s use of lighting, composition and active directorial skills, she transcends the document and creates photographs which are art.”

“I never thought of myself as a photographer — John was always the photographer,” Alvarado said. “I didn’t know I was going to love photography so much!”

Evy Warshawski is a member of the Napa County Library Foundation Board and a partner in E & M Presents, presenting Popovich Comedy Pet Theater on Sat., Dec. 5. For information, visit E&MPresents. eventbrite.com or call 707-224-4353.

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EVY WARSHAWSKI
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See PICTURES, Page C2

PICTURES

From Page C1

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