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WHAT'S EMERGING

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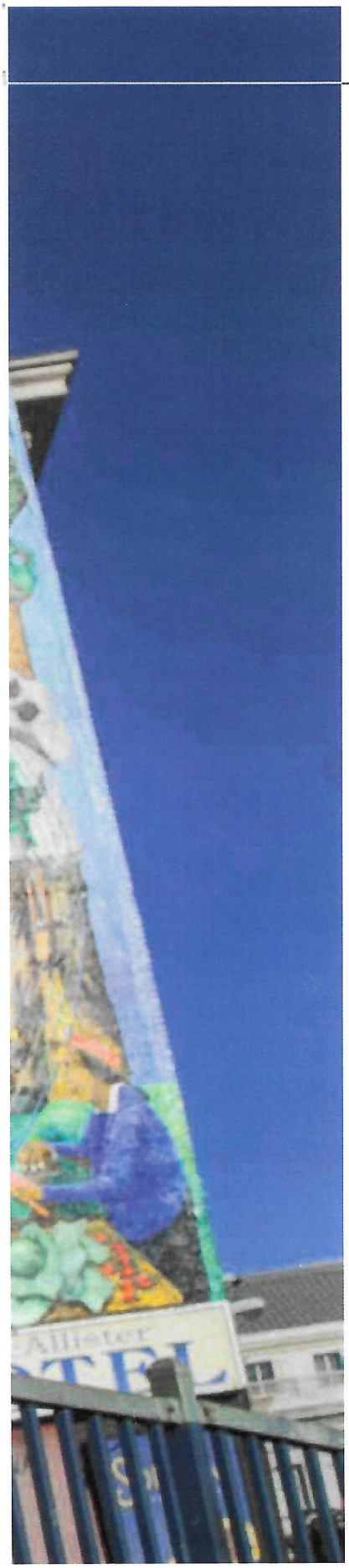


Photo by Justin Chotikul.

A Creative Community Discovered

The Wildflowers Institute's unique approach to highlighting informal local networks is helping under-the-radar artists in San Francisco's Tenderloin find their voices—and each other

BY JACQUELINE WHITE

GAYLE ROSEMOND'S DAY WASN'T GOING PARTICULARLY WELL. Returning from the laundromat, she discovered she'd locked herself out of her room at the Pierre, a hotel that had been converted to an SRO, or single-room occupancy building, in the Tenderloin district of San Francisco, a 50-block area that's the poorest in the city, yet abuts the swank Union Square shopping district.

Camped out in the TV room with her laundry, waiting to be let back in, Rosemond started chatting with a neighbor and learned about a competition—with a deadline in just a few days—for artists who live or work in the Tenderloin. Sixty artists would receive $1,000 each!

A singer—or chanteuse, as she prefers to call herself—Rosemond had an old demo tape she decided to submit. It turned out that Rosemond was exactly the kind of below-the-radar artist that the Wildflowers Institute, based in nearby Chinatown, was seeking to discover through the contest.

Though she considers herself "first and foremost a singer," Rosemond had put her artistic dreams on hold while raising a son and daughter as a single mom in Colorado. The hours of a nightclub singer would not have permitted the kind of attentive parenting she was committed to providing.

But with her children grown, Rosemond could hit the road. Her initial plan had been to stay in Redmond, California, with her brother, but after a successful audition in San Francisco, she realized she needed to move to the city in order to make rehearsals. After first staying in what turned out to be an illegal artists' squat, Rosemond, who works as an in-home health aide, was able to find stable housing three years ago at the Pierre Hotel. For $415 a month, she has a small room with a private bath, but no kitchen.

Rosemond's unplanned interaction in the TV room in some ways typifies the work of the Wildflowers Institute, cofounded by Hanmin Liu and Jennifer Mei in 1998 after two decades spent training international leaders in cross-cultural competence. Recognizing that significant power often operates under the surface, Wildflowers works to identify and funnel resources toward the informal networks that strengthen communities. The Wildflowers mapping process has charted everything from leadership dynamics at a Fortune 500 research institute to where Latino youth find safe places to hang out in gang territory.

Ira Watkins, an artist and resident of San Francisco's Tenderloin neighborhood, poses in front of a massive billboard displaying his painting in a community garden.





Photos by Justin Chotikul.



RIGHT: Hanmin Liu, president of Wildflowers Institute, at a meeting in the Tenderloin. OPPOSITE TOP: Wildflowers uses a unique modeling method that allows people to define the character of their communities. OPPOSITE BOTTOM: Pins mark artistic landmarks in the Tenderloin–known as St. Ann's Valley to early San Franciscans–on this cultural asset map.

In 2014, Wildflowers, which hadn't worked on an artist-specific project before, received a $180,000 grant from ArtPlace America to conduct a census of Tenderloin artists. (A self-professed "creative spirit," Liu, who is president of Wildflowers, doesn't consider himself an artist; he notes that cofounder Mei was trained in art history.) The mapping began with door-to-door canvassing and focused on the SROs, an architectural feature the Tenderloin has managed—so far—to retain, and which provides an oasis of affordability in a rapidly gentrifying city, one of the most expensive in America.

"For many of the residents who end up in the Tenderloin, it's their first stop in America or it's their last stop," notes Liu. "It's a community of people who have found themselves together not particularly by their own choosing, but because this is where they have to live."

Liu cautions, "We don't want to sugarcoat this. The Tenderloin stinks. It's full of urine. You see needles all around. It is gritty, it is tough, and it is poor." And yet, despite all that, or perhaps partly because of it, the Tenderloin manages to provide an environment that welcomes and sustains artists.

Simple economics is key. "It's all about affordability," notes Rosemond, who longs for the day she can afford her own kitchen. She describes her room as "kind of confining," but that very smallness means that people don't stay inside, turning the streets, according to Liu, into a de facto living room. If you walk down the sidewalk—or, in Rosemond's case, camp out in the TV room—you'll naturally connect up with others.

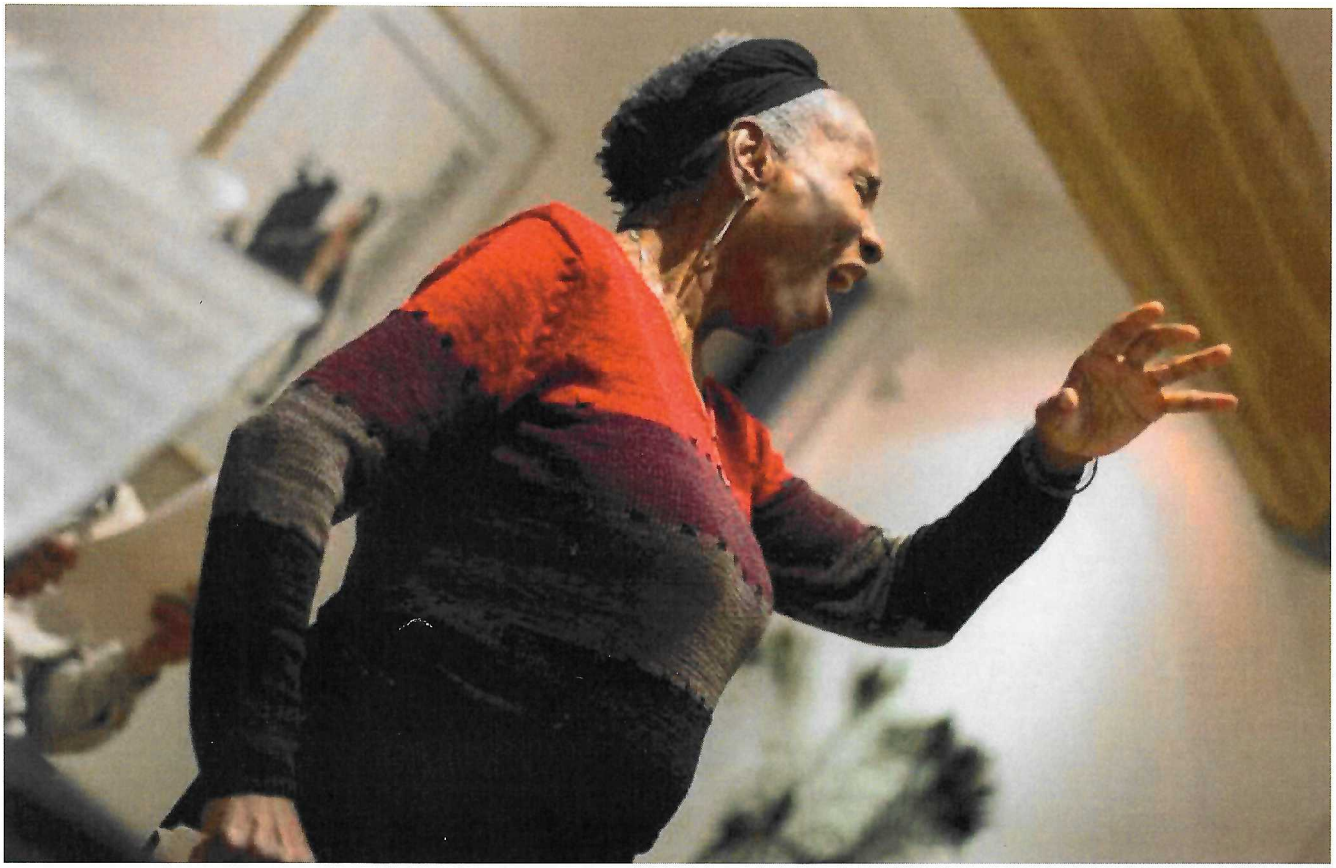
And for Rosemond, the very grittiness of the Tenderloin provides its own form of inspiration. Heading out to look in on her two clients with Alzheimer's, Rosemond walks by people sleeping in the street. And then, "I cross the street and there's the Hilton with their valets"—a contrast, Rosemond says, that she appreciates for keeping her in touch with "the pulse of what's really going on." It's a knowledge that she says infuses and deepens her singing: "You can't help but express what you see."

HOLDING UP A MIRROR

Through its canvassing, Wildflowers identified and mapped the location of over 650 artists who live or work in the Tenderloin. Liu makes a distinction between the artists who "come for the cheap rent and want to make it big and get out" and the "resident artists," the majority of whom have no formal artistic training and are disconnected from the gallery scene and other art institutions. Often, like Rosemond, they're seeking to revive a dormant passion.

Still, despite their large number, Tenderloin artists have not necessarily been aware of each other. For poet Jesse James Johnson, who has lived in the same Tenderloin SRO for 11 years—with a bed, desk, bookcase, sink, fridge, microwave, and a bathroom and showers down the hall—the mapping project was "a revelation," confirming something he'd always suspected and helping him shift from a feeling of isolation to a sense of "being part of something unique and powerful."

The 17-month ArtPlace grant culminated in December 2015 in the "Hidden Gems of the Tenderloin" awards ceremony, in which 60 artists whose work conveys the neighborhood ethos—including Johnson, Rosemond, and visual artists like Ira Watkins, who lives and paints in his van—received their awards. The event, held in the old-fashioned auditorium of the Kelly Cullen Community, an old YMCA converted into low-income housing for chronically homeless



After the conclusion of the ArtPlace grant, Wildflowers initiated an artist incubator with funds from the Kalliopeia Foundation. The aim was to amplify the voices of the resident artists. Here, Tenderloin resident Bisola Marignay, Ph.D., sings during an incubator session.

individuals, was, says Johnson, "like an explosion of energy. People were literally crying and embracing. People were discovering each other."

According to Johnson, who gets by on a $1,200 monthly disability check and types up his poems on a computer at the local community center, Wildflowers "held up a mirror to us. People were doing art but were hesitant to call themselves an artist. Now they recognize themselves as artists and are even more productive."

A HEALING HAVEN UNBURDENED BY STIGMA

For Johnson, who tends to write for a small audience of "maybe forty-nine people who I know," art in the Tenderloin "is not so tied to success and wealth and commodities." Rather, he says, a lot of the artists are "finding expression and trying to heal some of the wounds that they live with."

And, indeed, using art as a vehicle for healing was the dominant theme that emerged from the Wildflowers site visits with SRO artists in their "live/work studios." And, according to Liu, their art not only helped them clarify their own sense of themselves, but "it also clarified the terms they insisted on for an environment conducive to healing in the Tenderloin."

That some artists have even named the Tenderloin a "sanctuary" is perhaps rooted in the neighborhood's unique—and defiant—history. As one example, this past February, the Tenderloin Museum marked the centennial anniversary of the ultimately unsuccessful "vice district" closures of 1917 with an evening of live entertainment celebrating "one hundred years of resistance to traditional social mores."

That resistance also made the Tenderloin a haven for queer and transgender people back when their identities were criminal. And it continues to provide refuge for people who are marginalized today—or are here illegally. That sanctuary status can have a liberating effect: "When you're free of a lot of the stigmas that might burden you," Johnson says, "you're free to explore other ways to be." And, indeed, out-of-the-box artistic expression that might be deemed odd or problematic in other settings can get a free pass in the Tenderloin.

Rosemond observes that while the majority of people in her building are elderly and disabled, there are some painters and "a guy who does a kind of mime thing. He paints his whole body in gold and has a gold boom box." Rosemond, who says, "I'm not sure what you'd call his art," notes that "that's one thing in the Tenderloin—they think outside the box here for sure."





Photos by Justin Chotiku.

ABOVE: Ira Watkins displays *Falling Through the Cracks*, one of many artworks born of the Wildflowers incubator. TOP: These images represent a small fraction of the 650+ Tenderloin artists and cultural leaders that Wildflowers identified and engaged with over the past several years.



Jesse James Johnson read from his poem "Fugitives" at an incubator session. The group of artists presenting at this event received a standing ovation.

Photo by Justin Chotikul.

COUNTERING THE GENTRIFICATION THREAT

After the "Hidden Gems" event, which concluded the ArtPlace grant, Wildflowers made continuing the project "our own initiative," says Liu. Using general operating funds from the Kalliopeia Foundation, Wildflowers initiated an artist incubator with the aim of "amplifying" the voices of the resident artists. The stakes are high.

"There are people with money who are trying to do away with the SRO hotels, which is where I live," observes Rosemond. The Tenderloin, Johnson concurs, "is on the verge of disappearing, so anything we can do to help it survive and give it voice is important."

The 30 intensive artist incubator meetings helped the artists rise to the challenge. Johnson, who concedes that he mumbles and tends to read his work too fast, received positive comments about his delivery for the first time after the December 2016 incubator presentation, which included singing, spoken word, and the projection of a painting by Ira Watkins. Johnson credits the process of collaborating with the other artists—"very talented, skilled people"—as the transformational factor. "Everyone upped their game," he says. "We wanted to perform our very best: it wasn't just about us, it was about the group." And the group of artists, Liu notes, received a spontaneous standing ovation from about 250 people when their presentations ended.

As for what's next, Liu says Wildflowers will continue to work as it does in any community in which it operates, seeking to "build an interface between the formal and informal networks." In the Tenderloin, that means creating forums for the artists to articulate the value that their "unorthodox self-organized sanctuary for healing" offers to a fiercely gentrifying city.

In one such example, Wildflowers connected filmmakers Todd Sills and Kevin D. Wong with Rosemond, and the pair have begun filming her for their documentary *Home Is a Hotel,* which presents stories of current SRO residents. It's an attempt to counter current efforts to rebrand SROs as "microhousing" to lure tech hipsters.

California Assemblymember David Chiu represents eastern San Francisco, which includes the Tenderloin. He sees the Wildflowers artist census as "helping make the case that we need to assure that the vision and creativity of artists living in SROs continues to be a part of the fabric of our great city. Every story of an artist, writer, or poet who is threatened due to our housing crisis helps inform the public and policymakers on why we need to address San Francisco's affordability crisis."

Minneapolis writer **JACQUELINE WHITE** *is the founder and director of the Minnesota Host Home Network, which champions permanent connections with caring adults for youth experiencing homelessness.*