

BELIEFS

Capturing faith in unexpected places

Rick Nahmias' photos find spirituality in the state's marginalized communities.

MITCHELL LANDSBERG

No clear, common thread ties a Mexican sex worker in San Francisco to members of a deaf Mormon community in San Diego. Little would seem to connect the former nuns of the Immaculate Heart Community in Santa Barbara with prison inmates at San Quentin or Chino.

The same could be said of recovering drug addicts in Culver City and Cambodian refugees in Santa Ana, AIDS patients in West Hollywood and members of a Native American tribe in Santa Rosa.

Rick Nahmias saw a connection, though. A Los Angeles-based photographer who is drawn to marginalized communities, Nahmias found that all of these disparate Californians shared a sense of spirituality that infused and helped define their lives. As he spent time with them, he said he found "stories of people going against the grain."

The result was "Golden States of Grace: Prayers of the Disinherited," a book of photographs, prayers and commentary about and by 11 groups of people living, in some way, outside society's



'THE DISINHERITED': Krystal, a transsexual sex worker in San Francisco, holds a devotional card of St. Jude, the Catholic patron saint of lost causes.

mainstream. (It also includes African American Pentecostalist and Baptist communities in the San Joaquin Valley and a transgender gospel choir in San Francisco.)

Nahmias said he spent three years on the project, photographing and recording interviews with members of the various groups. The book, which he also produced as a multimedia gallery exhibition, is filled with black-and-white photographs that are, by turns,

haunting, joyful and serene—reflecting grace in even the most difficult of circumstances.

There is the image of two Buddhist cellmates at San Quentin, sitting on bunk beds for morning prayer, searching for peace in a place where that must be a rare quality.

There is Krystal, a transsexual sex worker from Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, now working in San Francisco, who holds a devotional card of St. Jude, the

Catholic patron saint of lost causes.

There is Mark, a shirtless man covered in tattoos that reflect his search for meaning in Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Judaism; he was photographed at Beit T'Shuvah, a Jewish halfway house in Culver City for those struggling with addiction.

Throughout, Nahmias has interwoven commentary and prayers from the subjects of the photographs.

He intentionally placed



BEHIND BARS: Marty, a Vietnam veteran serving a life sentence for murder, studies Buddhism.

prayers from one group next to photographs of another; a way, he said, of emphasizing the universal nature of religion.

So, for instance, beside a photograph of a member of Women of Wisdom, a group that brings female prison inmates together with women from the surrounding community, there is a quotation from a member of Transcendence, the transgender gospel choir.

"If God was with me when I was on crack," it begins, "if he was with me when I was in prison; if he was with me when I was committing crimes, and kept me, I think he loves me."

Sister Suzanne Jabro, a Catholic nun who leads Women of Wisdom, said Nahmias visited her group at the California Institution

for Women in Chino this week and showed a multimedia slide show of the book. She called it "a transformational experience" as the women saw photos of themselves projected alongside those of others.

"As they looked at all these groups, their reflection was, 'Oh my, we're all one, it's the spirituality that unites us,'" she said. "You know, people fight over their religions, but spirituality is [uniting]. So if you dig deep enough, you're going to find the common wellspring where we're all one, all in need of the sacred. Whatever it is for you, it may be different than it is for me, but we're all in need of it. So it was pretty powerful."

mitchell.landsberg@latimes.com