

## Life & Times Transcript

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Val Zavala>> Tonight on Life and Times --

Celebrities are making waves. Should a gas terminal be built off the coast of Malibu?

Kathi Hann>> We only produce thirteen percent of our gas and we can no longer rely on our other sources.

Pierce Brosnan>> What they're attempting to do hasn't been done before in these waters and not on such a large scale as this.

Val Zavala>> And then, it's called "Golden States of Grace". A new exhibit chronicles how faith can flourish in the face of adversity.

These stories and more next on tonight's Life and Times.

Announcer>> Life and Times is made possible through the generous support of the L.K. Whittier Foundation dedicated to improving the quality of life by supporting innovative endeavors in the fields of medicine, health, science and education.

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Val Zavala>> Is there really a God for prostitutes and drug dealers? Well, in fact, there is. Prostitutes, drug dealers and others on the edge of the society often have deep spiritual beliefs that we're completely unaware of. Well, now that spiritual life is coming to light at the Fullerton Museum through the work of photographer, Rick Nahmias.

Inside, you'll find fifty-five remarkable images of unusual spiritual communities, each one out of the mainstream on the edges of society, such as the world's only transgender gospel choir, Zen Buddhist inmates in San Quentin, a former con man, drug addict and thief who's now a Rabbi helping others recover. But the most controversial subject by far is this woman.

Rick Nahmias>> I'm standing next to a photograph of a transsexual Latina sex worker who is devoted to the folk deity, Santisima Muerte. Yajahira began prostituting herself at the age of twelve, which was about the same time she began praying to Santisima Muerte. It's also a deity whom is seen by the poor, especially in Latin American countries and Mexico, who protects those in difficult professions, drug dealers, policemen, prostitutes.

They are very much aware that they're on their own. They're on their own as immigrants. Most of them are here illegally. They're on their own as prostitutes. They're on their own as transsexuals. I mean, how many more marks against you can you have? So if you find a deity who welcomes that, embraces that and protects that, you're going to embrace it.

Val Zavala>> Rick Nahmias studied religion at NYU and was intrigued by the strength that it lends people who are barely hanging on. He worked on this project for ten years, looking for the spiritual communities and gaining their trust. He only photographed them if the whole group approved.

Rick Nahmias>> This is a portrait of Juan and Jose who are a pair of blind and deaf brothers who are members of the University Deaf Branch of the Mormon Church down in San Diego.

Val Zavala>> Both brothers are blind and deaf?

Rick Nahmias>> Both brothers, yeah. So they're not able to see any of the signing that's going on or hear any of the other things, so all the communication these two gentlemen get is through their hands. They were the only disinherited community that I found that was wholly embraced by the

institution of the religion they were part of.

Meaning that the Church of Latter Day Saints, twenty or thirty years ago, created a branch specifically for deaf Mormons. They were ahead of their time with this and they basically realized that the disabilities were preventing these people who were hearing impaired of enjoying and completely getting involved with the Mormon community and Mormon life.

Val Zavala>> This man is a Muslim in Orange County. He's part of a tiny Islamic sect called the Cham from Cambodia. A third of them were wiped out by the Khmer Rouge, mostly from starvation. Fifteen surviving families settled in an apartment building in Santa Ana. This beautiful girl is a part of a new generation of a dying culture.

Rick Nahmias>> The Cham culture and language is near extinct. The sad thing is, though, that the elders have resigned themselves to the fact that they're going to lose it because the kids are just bombarded every day with a different culture. If they've got the attention span to teach the kids one thing, they want to teach them the faith. They've learned that the culture, unfortunately, has to take a second back seat to it.

There's a striking humility and graciousness about these people that was overwhelming to me. They were so humble at times that they didn't even know that they were being photographed or how to react with a camera.

Val Zavala>> Rick calls this section of the exhibit "The Wall of Redemption".

Rick Nahmias>> This specific group of incarcerated individuals and recovering addicts are people who, through their own actions, became disinherited and are trying to find a way back to their own spiritual equilibrium, if you will.

Val Zavala>> This woman killed someone in a love triangle. She's serving her third decade behind bars. At the time of her conviction, laws were less sympathetic to abused women.

Rick Nahmias>> She was physically and emotionally abused in a three-way triangle and she has been up for parole, I think it's now fourteen times, and been turned down every single time. Although she was found fit by the Board of Corrections, the governor in every case turned her down. They're part of a group, the third portrait being Harriett who was an upper middle class white woman who was dealing with, you know, fraud or embezzlement.

They come from very different backgrounds, but they're all part of this group that the Sister Suzanne Leeds called Women of Wisdom. She has this amazing sense of energy, this complete lack of judgment which is something I so admire. As someone who works as a documentary photographer, you do find yourself at times getting snagged on your own judgments. What she brings to the table is incredibly inspirational.

I left finding that the incarcerated communities were one of the most moving and personally charged things. I think part of that is that they can't leave at the end of the day. All the people that I have in this show may not have full use of their bodies. They may have come from really hideous pasts. But they have the freedom to use their legs and get up and move to another place. These people in incarceration, I think, come to spirituality in a whole different way because they are locked into a physical place.

Val Zavala>> In Santa Rose, north of San Francisco, Rick found Native Americans who were beginning to reclaim their culture. This was taken at their annual Acorn Festival.

Rick Nahmias>> Their Tribal Chairman, Greg Sarris, is a well-known California Native American writer. He has a great way of understanding and defining it. He says, "The earth is their bible." I think that speaks volumes as far as what the earth and every stone and every leaf and every river means to them and the stories which it has absorbed and which is given back to them.

Val Zavala>> The name of the exhibit is "States of Grace: Prayers of the Disinherited", but Rick says that it could have simply been called "Everybody Prays".

Rick Nahmias>> More and more now today, I think, since we've really been divided by politics and

religious right and fundamentalisms, these people are even more marginalized than they were six or eight years ago. If anything, I'm just hoping that people come to see this work with an open enough mind to realize, yes, it doesn't matter where you fall on the board game of life, you too have to grapple with a higher power somewhere and sometime in your life. It's going to happen.

Val Zavala>> There is also a CD of music and voices behind the faces that you can listen to as you walk through the gallery. There's a speaker series featuring religious leaders, scholars and some of the people in the photographs. For information, you can go to their website at [cityoffullerton.com/depts/museum](http://cityoffullerton.com/depts/museum). The exhibit is up through January 14.