



# VOICEWAVES

## long beach

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# REFUGE NO MORE?

Cambodia Town has seen overcrowded housing, dwindling stores, but more art. What's at stake for the refugee community?

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

By Michael Lozano

### sanc-tu-ar-y

noun

Refuge or safety from pursuit, persecution, or other danger.

— Oxford Dictionary

If you live in the Willmore district like I do, you are seeing more people sleeping on curbs -- literally outside your living room window -- and find that they are often covered by a single blanket.

People tell us that recently the courtroom lines for evictions are 50-people-long.

On top of that, local immigrants tell us that many of their old anxieties have resurfaced since November 2016: fear around police, while driving, and anxiety entering schools and hospitals, and probably the mere thought of what the future can bring.

However, for this edition of VoiceWaves' youth media newspaper, we hope our stories remind you that, despite the challenges, the future can bring good.

We are bringing you real issues as lived through the eyes of those who continue to build refuge from the city's social ills. As you'll read, some have been doing it for decades. Some are just getting started.

The legacy of hip-hop store V.I.P. Records is one of survival. The brand has endured for 40 years and, throughout that time, their music studio provided a safe, creative refuge for Long Beach youth escaping city violence.

You'll also read how Cambodia Town

residents stick together, even in crowded housing, as they seek cultural refuge in a cost-rising town that had once welcomed them as refugees fleeing their home country.

Today, immigrants are getting hands-on with helping draft a local sanctuary policy so their entire city can be a refuge.

What garners less attention is the effort Long Beach's youth are putting to carve out their own safe places by pushing LBUSD schools to end their dropout culture and racially-skewed suspensions.

Also, we can't forget about our LGBT family. In absence of inclusive sports culture, local queer groups have launched their own competitive kickball league. And by competitive, I mean competitive.

Clearly, city youth and residents have been building their own sanctuaries here for decades. Not that city leaders should get comfortable -- the role of leaders is to pass policy. But the role of community is to push and also protect one another.

We hope these stories inspire you to imagine what your sanctuary is, or what it can be. Then, perhaps we can build together and recognize that, even in trying times, community is our best refuge.

## Voices on School Equity

School equity: what is it? In layman's terms, it's providing opportunities for quality education by giving more help to students who need it. But time and time again, income determines a student's access to educational fairness, where poorer, often students of color, see fewer counselors, limited after-school programs or outdated textbooks and classroom technology. In 2013, Gov. Jerry Brown implemented the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) which sought to revamp school funding and allocate resources equitably, particularly for school districts with highly concentrated low-income or English learner students. Despite this, analysts still see an education gap between rich and poor schools, which translates to limited school staff or classes offered, according to research by Education Trust-West. Brown's 2018-2019 budget proposal dedicates spending to address remaining issues such as teacher shortages and flawed college pathways. Below, three VoiceWaves Youth Reporters, who all happen to be from Long Beach Polytechnic High School, answer how equity exists or not at their school.

### Jannai Simmons, 17



As far as equality would go, I'd say my school is more progressive than other schools simply because it's more diverse. If I can say that there is any difference, it would maybe be within the school academies. Some academies have first choice on some things and others don't. This is my senior year, and this is the first year taking theater, for example. I tried to get into theater for all three years, but since I'm in a specific academy, I have last choice at which classes I want. So, I couldn't get into the academy that I wanted to.

### Jordyn Saunders, 17



Most students that transfer from other schools who don't really know what to focus on in high school or what they want to study kind of just get dropped in the lesser pathways like the Justice Academy ... The Justice Academy is one of the lesser pathways that doesn't have a lot of programs that are helpful to students compared to other pathways like Program of Additional Curricular Experiences (PACE) and Center for International Curriculum (CIC).

### Patrick Thompson, 17



One thing about the basic programs, such as the Justice Academy, is that you're exposed to a bunch of different people. Even if you are in a bad environment, you learn how to deal with certain people in certain environments. So I think that's the good thing -- just the exposure, the more diverse that it gets. On the other hand, in the more specifies programs like PACE and CIC, there's more of a less diverse crowd. It's mostly white and Asian people only in those programs. There's not a ton of diversity in that sense. So I think that it can be kind of secluding.

## VOICEWAVES long beach

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"VOICEWAVES RECONNECTED ME TO THE DESIRE TO BE A JOURNALIST."

VoiceWaves has been teaching journalism and multimedia to Long Beach youth ages 15 to 25 since 2011.

Championing youth leadership & authentic storytelling, our Youth Reporters write, film, and podcast to report the story of a diverse Long Beach to inspire community engagement.

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# Refinery to Expand, May Pose Greater Health Risk

Andeavor has the OK to create the coast's largest refinery near West Long Beach despite opposition from nearby cities and environmental groups.

By Crystal Niebla

Maurice Weiner noticed a dark substance gathering inside his West Long Beach home. He ran his finger on the walls and windows.

"That's soot that's flying and coming into our homes, not just in my area, [but] across Santa Fe [Avenue] all over in the westside," said Weiner, 67, who lives less than three miles from the towering Andeavor — formerly known as Tesoro -- Refinery in Carson.

After a decade of living near multiple refineries, freeways and truck stations, he and his family started developing coughs. The doctor didn't have good news for them.

"All of a sudden we have asthma, bronchitis," he said.

Farther down Santa Fe Avenue, 57-year-old Graciela Cortez lives about a mile and a half from Andeavor's second oil refinery in Wilmington.

Her husband, Rafael, died from cancer at age 56. Among his many illnesses, Rafael suffered from asthma for his entire life, and Graciela said living in a polluted area for 13 years didn't help his lungs.

Within the epicenter of Long Beach's worst air, residents and local environmentalists worry that life there in the often-called "dead zone" will worsen as Andeavor, one of the largest oil refineries on the West Coast, is already on track to connect its two nearby facilities via new pipelines.

Andeavor's project, known as the Los Angeles Refinery Integration and Compliance Project (LARIC), would invest \$460 million to physically integrate and upgrade its Wilmington and Carson refineries, which already sit within two miles of Long Beach schools, parks and neighborhoods.

In May 2017, the South Coast Air Quality Management District (AQMD) approved a revised and final Environmental Impact Report (EIR) of LARIC, granting Andeavor the necessary permits to begin building its project the month after.

"I have approved these permits following extensive review of them by our staff and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency," said Wayne Nastro, the AQMD's executive officer, in a press release in June. "This project will achieve an overall reduction in air pollution and will reduce impacts to the neighboring community."

Andeavor says that it will also improve air quality by substantially reducing local emissions and upgrading refinery equipment.

Its previous website proposed shutting down its fluid catalytic cracking unit — a tool used for crude oil conversion — in Wilmington, potentially reducing greenhouse gases and harmful levels of nitrogen oxide, sulfur oxide and carbon monoxide.

However, the LARIC project revealed that at the same time volatile organic compounds (VOCs) will increase. VOCs, according to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), are emissions that include a variety of chemicals, some of which may have short- and long-term adverse health effects.

That's why Julia May, a scientist and engineer with over 25 years of experience in monitoring pollution, believes that Andeavor's claims that the project will lower emissions are misleading.

May said that along with smog production, VOCs may



**"That's soot that's flying and coming into our homes, not just in my area, [but] across Santa Fe [Avenue] all over in the westside."**

— Maurice Weiner, lives less than three miles from the Andeavor Refinery

yield emissions more toxic than others such as benzene, a chemical known to cause cancer.

"It's very important to prevent and reduce VOC emissions and not increase them, especially in the South Coast that has very high levels of smog — extreme levels of smog — that cause all kinds of problems for health," May said.

The neighborhoods bordering the project's site, among Long Beach's most diverse and poorest, have been known to have higher rates of cancer, low birth weights and respiratory issues for years.

At the westside's Hudson Park, for example, the carcinogenic risk is about 1.8 times higher than at the eastside's El Dorado Park, according to data analyzed from the AQMD carcinogenic risk map.

**Above:** Andeavor's refinery towers on Wilmington Avenue and 223rd Street in Carson. Andeavor plans to connect its Carson and Wilmington facilities with up to 15 new pipelines.

**Left:** Maurice Weiner, 67, sits across inhalers and allergy medication he and his family use daily at Windward Village in West Long Beach on March 16, 2017.

Photos by Crystal Niebla

Hudson Park also has an asthma score of 80, while El Dorado Park scores 24 based on a zero to 100 percentile range, according to the state's EPA mapping software.

Though the air has improved over the last decades, the South Coast air basin "still [has], essentially, the worst air quality in the nation," AQMD spokesperson Sam Atwood said.

A state study from January 2017 reported that exposure to traffic and outdoor air pollutants cause asthma and can trigger asthma attacks, especially for poor communities.

With the merger, Andeavor will be "the largest refinery on the West Coast, and we're in an already overly burdened community in terms of pollution," said Taylor Thomas, a research and policy analyst at East Yard Communities for Environmental Justice (EYCEJ).

To connect Andeavor's two refineries, 15 gas and oil pipelines will be routed underground and on South Alameda Street and East Sepulveda Boulevard, less than two miles from Elizabeth Hudson Elementary School and Admiral Kidd Park.

Andeavor's history of repeated leaks, toxic burning of excess gases — better known as flares — and past refinery explosions are also raising more concerns.

In August 2016, the AQMD detected leaks at the Wilmington refinery above VOC emission limits. Three days later, a sulfur explosion occurred.

Nearby, the City of Carson considered suing the AQMD over safety concerns related to the Andeavor project, and Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti had also issued concerns

**Refinery** continued on page 4



# The True Cost of Transitioning

A Long Beach youth explains how being transgender has really hurt their wallet.

By Abel Avalos

When the word transgender comes to mind, some immediately think of Caitlyn Jenner because in recent years, she was thrown into the spotlight for publicly coming out as a transgender woman. One of the most interesting parts of her publicly coming out was the “reveal” of her new self where an almost completely different person emerged. But, she, a famous multi-millionaire, is an unrealistic image of what physically transitioning is like for most trans people. Speaking from experience as someone who identifies as female to male (FtM) and is currently transitioning, things are not always smooth sailing.

After coming out at age 16, my wardrobe needed a change. I threw out every scoop neck T-shirt, floral print and girl underwear I owned. Replacing all that with men’s

clothes was not good on my wallet, but it was a confidence boost. Buying new clothes wasn’t all I needed, however. I needed to start my physical transition, too.

As a minor, the steps to start transitioning is hard. First, you have to publicly be open (tell your parents, teachers and friends, for example) about transitioning for one year. After that requirement is fulfilled, your therapist can approve hormone treatment and needs your parents to sign off on it. I waited till after I was age 18 to start hormone injections because I couldn’t afford to have a full-time therapist, which is required for minors.

Looking at the purely monetary side of physically transitioning, becoming your true self can cost upwards of \$75,000, and in some cases much more. To medically transition for me meant starting gender affirming hormones — testosterone injections. With insurance I pay \$35 to \$65 on one month’s supply and needles. That price varies by person and insurance. Therapists can cost around \$60 a session four times

a month, and that would be considered cheap. More expensive sessions can cost up to \$350 a session.

What I have my sights on next is changing my legal name and gender, and I need around \$500 to get the paperwork filed with the court system. Luckily, I can apply for a fee waiver for living in a single parent household.

Most people associate being trans with “the surgery,” and there are generally two kinds. The first is top surgery, which is either the adding of breast tissue or the removal of it. These surgeries average from \$5,000 to \$10,000. The second kind of surgery is bottom surgery, which range from \$10,000 up to \$70,000. Some people travel outside of the United States for sexual reassignment surgery because the American health care system doesn’t offer

help for people to afford them. These kinds of surgeries are also dangerous and have high chances of complications. So even if it

goes smoothly during the operation, people can stay in the hospital with related problems for months.

Transitioning does not happen overnight. It takes time, a lot of emotional labor, patience and an ungodly amount of money. There are so many aspects of being trans that are so hard deal with. We put ourselves at risk for simply wanting to live

freely in our own skin, and we deal with harassment and discrimination even from the highest positions of our government. Our fight for equality and acceptance is not over. The struggle is real, but it’s all worth it when I’ll finally get to live my life as my true self.

**“Transitioning does not happen overnight. It takes time, a lot of emotional labor, patience and an ungodly amount of money.”**

## Refinery

*continued from page 3*

about the project via a letter.

Carson dropped its legal complaint after it reached a \$45 million settlement with Andeavor in July 2017. In exchange, the money would be used to for community improvements. By August 2017, Tesoro officially changed its name to Andeavor.

Thomas from EYCEJ believes that Carson had a choice of accepting the money and “poison” its residents or decline and have the same result.

“Unfortunately, the forces of capitalism and failed regulatory action created a death bed that Carson and adjacent cities had to lie in,” Thomas said via email.

Having lost the battle, EYCEJ will be monitoring the project and strategizing how to address the system of oil and gas production and extraction as whole, not just Andeavor.

Neither Andeavor or Long Beach Mayor Robert Garcia responded to repeated interview requests.

The previous EIR draft drew controversy from environmentalists who said the report left out information on potential dangers.

That includes building a dozen new pressure relief devices for flares — which may emit very large emissions during emergencies — and having certain operations switch to more explosive, carcinogenic crude oil imports such as Bakken crude.

“[The AQMD] didn’t evaluate that at all,



A towering flare broke out at a nearby refinery next to the Andeavor facility in Wilmington, a community in Los Angeles, on June 28, 2017.

Photo by  
Crystal Niebla

and that’s a clear deficiency,” said May, also a senior scientist for Communities for a Better Environment, an environmental activist organization.

Carson officials stated that the EIR underestimated the project’s impact on poor residents and used overly technical language.

“[State guidelines] emphasize that EIRs should readily be understandable by the layperson,” Carson City Manager Ken Farfsing wrote in a March 2017 objection, echoing

views by some Long Beach residents.

Whitney Amaya, 24, who has lived at her West Long Beach home for 18 years, believes that Andeavor lacked transparency and outreach with non-English speakers.

“They’re a company, so they’re motivated by profit, not necessarily by the needs of the community,” Amaya said.

She would have been oblivious to Andeavor’s expansion plans if she hadn’t joined EYCEJ, the local environmental health advoca-

cy group, she said.

But other residents like Graciela Cortez, a 57-year-old who only speaks Spanish, have not been made aware of the project.

After seeing her husband suffer from asthma and ultimately die from cancer, she remains living in the same home, being unable to afford moving elsewhere, inside the city’s “dead zone.”

“Where can I go?” she asked in Spanish. “I have to deal with it.”



# Vince Staples Reigns as a 'Big Fish'



The North Long Beach rapper's most ambitious album to date "Big Fish Theory" preserves his keen observational style while exploring new territory.

**By Rudy Cardoso-Peraza**

Vince Staples has been delivering heat for a while and it has been quite a treat to see his artistry grow since 2010. Back in his early years rapping, Staples typically rapped with a monotone demeanor that worked completely fine for him as most beats he rapped over were hard-hitting and simple. Captivating listeners with an effortless but strong lyrical presence, his work from then was depressing in theme as he struggled dealing with family, the harsh realities of growing up in North Long Beach, and, at times, a brash disregard for Christianity heard throughout his first mixtape, "Shyne Coldchain Vol. 1."

Flash-forward to the summer of 2017 and Staples has released his most ambitious album to date. "Big Fish Theory" continues Staples' traction as a conversationalist and keen observer of what the rap game brings to play. But it is an album that doesn't sound like your typical hip-hop record and that is what makes "Big Fish Theory" stand out in the present day. If the sound and vibe of the album were to be summed up, it sounds much like what some Crips would listen to at an electronic dance music festival.

Staples was recently snubbed from major award nominations, while critics at the Los Angeles Times and Variety dubbed his latest album as among the best of all 2017. Perhaps hard for some to swallow, "Big Fish Theory" is an album where Staples explores new territory and challenges his ear for music by bringing along his friend and electronic producer, Zack Seckoff to help tweak the sound of the album. Others assembled on the album include electronic club producers such as SOPHIE, GTA, and Flume who all respectively compliment Staples' verses with the sounds of house and garage

music. Staples' distinct voice and flow resonate well with the synthesizers, heavy bass and energetic tempos throughout the 36-minute long album. The album's production resembles the feeling you'd get at the beach, resonating with Long Beach vibes in a way that'll have you c-walking at the club.

Starting off the album with "Crabs In A Bucket," Staples addresses the commonplace mentality of putting others down in order to make oneself feel superior. He raises a question right away: "Crabs in a bucket, wanna' see you at the bottom, don't you love it?" Staples alludes to his upcoming in the hip-hop world as others might have criticized him for his growth and experimentation as an artist and the sad reality that many impoverished minorities will remain in the bucket and continue living in those poor conditions society has grown to live with.

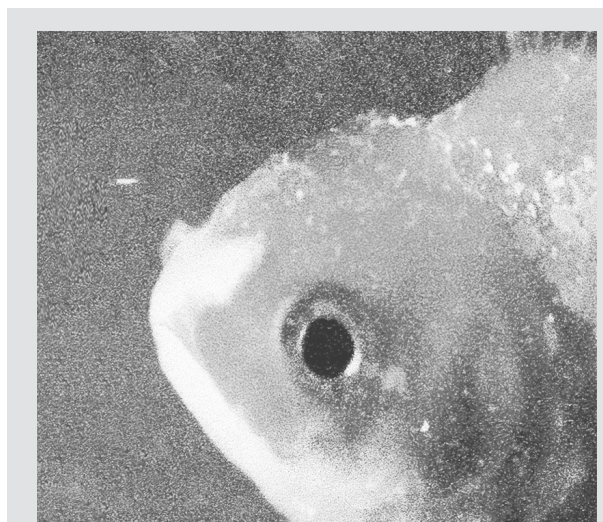
The features on the album include Juicy J and Ty Dolla Sign on songs such as "Big Fish" and "Rain Come Down." Kendrick Lamar is also featured on "Yeah Right" and you are right if you think that he stole the spotlight because he ran with it and didn't look back. On "Yeah Right," Staples literally questions the rap industry if they're truly about that life when it comes to the image they present, with whether its being financially stable or relevant in the industry and everything in between. Lamar, on the other hand, switches up flows on his verse proving that he is as versatile as can be while maintaining the lyrical integrity he's grown to spearhead

in the mainstream hip-hop world.

One takeaway from observing Vince Staples' growth as an artist is the ability to experiment with music much like his contemporary, Kanye West, whose approach with his 2013 album, "Yeezus," was met with mixed criticism and its impact is yet to be clear.

"Big Fish Theory" is a big risk for Staples to take yet it very closely aligns with the attitude the rapper has, pushing his nihilistic narrative with a raw, dystopian sound. Its message further propels Staples as a success story for defying the cliché rap lifestyle perpetuated by media.

It is an impossible dream for many to become a rapper via the gangbanging and drug dealing lifestyles many have grown to idolize. This is in contrast to who Vince Staples is -- an African-American who was raised in the hood, participated in those activities yet managed to escape out of that environment. In addition, Staples' wittiness and unflinching opinions allow him to have a solid groundwork for his platform to give back to the community, as he



**Vince Staples**  
**"Big Fish Theory"**  
**ARTium • Blacksmith • Def Jam**

has done in Long Beach.

"Big Fish Theory" is an evolution for Staples, an album forging a solid statement of the turbulent times in our society as well as staying true to himself and his beliefs. One can only imagine what is next for Staples, but for the time being, "Big Fish Theory" will definitely stand out amongst the plethora of music releases for years to come.



# Dirt, Sweat, and Kickball

Long Beach's Queer League is not only competitive, it's bringing all orientations together.

By Matthew Gozzip

"Right stuff," "licorice," "ball buster," read the players' jerseys as dirt and chalk wafted across the baseball field at Marina Vista Park. But the athletes, covered in a warm sweat of competition, were unfazed by the dust on that spring day last year.

A hulking man on the mound surveyed the plate, searching for the perfect angle to pitch. Then, came a powerful wind up, a graceful release, and at last —

A kick?

Kickball may be most popular on elementary school playgrounds, but the Long Beach Varsity Gay Kickball League has evolved it from a small neighborhood competition among friends into a cultural phenomenon made up of more than 60 queer and hetero locals.

The players said it was much needed given the lack of healthier social outlets in gay Long Beach.

"A lot of gay people have to meet at bars and it is not ideal," said Alex Mehlbrech, the founder of the Long Beach league. "Competitive sports, while mostly sober, is a much better way to meet people."

The original Varsity Gay League began in West Hollywood in 2007 as a recreational alternative for members of the LGBT community to interact with each other through a variety of sports. The league now spans at least 10 major cities across the U.S.

The Long Beach league ignited its fall season in October with the addition of a queer-friendly Beach Volleyball league competing regularly in Belmont Shore.

Mehlbrech, a Los Alamitos resident and student at Cal State Long Beach, participated in the original West Hollywood league but felt that his hometown had a large enough community to begin its own.

"It's difficult to connect with younger and older members of the gay community and the league was meant to bring everyone together," Mehlbrech said.

He began the Long Beach kickball competition in 2016 with only four teams, working out the scheduling and organizational problems that come with establishing a new league. More than a year later, the tournament has expanded to 16 teams with more than 200 members.

"It was difficult at first to get people to play kickball," Mehlbrech said.

"This is a game that fifth graders usually play but slowly people are becoming interested in just the camaraderie."

Allowing athletes of all sexualities to participate has bonded a community that



**Above:** Kickball players mingle after a game in spring 2017.

**Right:** Player 11 tries to tag out his opponent running for home plate.

**Below:** The Varsity Gay League has the only LGBT Kickball League in California.

*Photos by Matthew Gozzip*



at times felt disjointed. Carl Gene Phillips, a Long Beach resident and openly gay man, felt loosely connected to his LGBT neighbors until the league came around.

"Long Beach is super diverse, but most of my friends identified as heterosexual and cis-gender," said Phillips, referring to a person who's not transgender (or more descriptively, someone whose gender corresponds with the sex assigned at birth). "Kickball put me on a team with other people that I can identify with and now I have a large part of the gay community supporting me."

Mike Lektorich, coach and player for his team, Jessie's Boy, never really played sports growing up. He was often seen as an outsider in the "aggressive, masculine" sports

community. To this day, he finds there aren't many avenues for gay youth to play sports.

"I think society tends to not understand that masculinity and sexuality have no correlation," said Lektorich. "This Long Beach league lets us defy society's stereotypes."

Players regularly compete rain or shine, power-through injuries and have yet to cancel a game since their league started in October 2016. And despite winning or losing, the competition continues to nurture the goals of unity by emphasizing teamwork across different backgrounds.

"My boyfriend had a lot of cis-gender friends who joined [in 2016] and their mindsets changed," Mehlbrech said. "The trophy doesn't matter as much as the fun

and learning."

Sportswise, the season is sure to be a bitter one, with winning teams set to vie in the national LGBT kickball tournament in Las Vegas early this year. Prizes consist of a "Trophy, Medals and NATIONAL Bragging Rights!" the tournament's website reads.

Mehlbrech's now-reigning team was the first to represent Long Beach in a Palm Springs competition recently and they are excited to test their skills in more cities around the country.

Does Mehlbrech's team have a chance of winning in Las Vegas?

"Oh yeah, we're ready," Mehlbrech said.

To join the team, register at [varsitygay-league.com](http://varsitygay-league.com).





Interdisciplinary artist Sayon Syprasoeuth paints his Cambodia-themed mural located on the corner of Dawson Avenue and Anaheim Street on June 30, 2017.

*Photo by Crystal Niebla*

# *Beauty Without the Pain*

**Can Cambodian Americans revitalize their town without displacing their own?**

**By Crystal Niebla**

Sayon Syprasoeuth glides his 3-inch paint roller over a large, cartoon outline of a Cambodian dancer's face. Her orange-toned head towers between two window panes on a second-story building. To the right of her are three other dancers, each with their right arms angled like a backward "Z," palms faced up and decorated with ancient Cambodian jewelry.

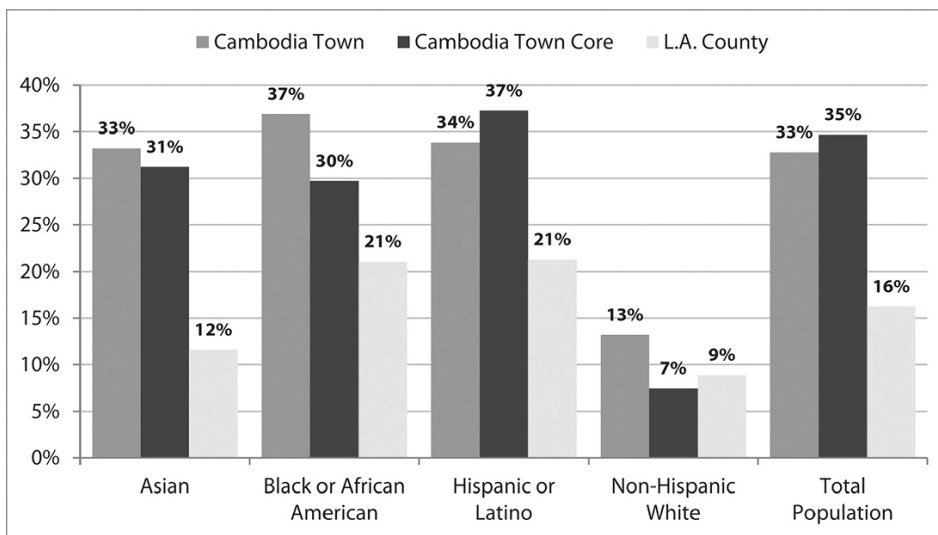
Syprasoeuth reaches his long and slender body to his mural. On his left hand, he holds a small paint tray and uses his right to soak his roller. He draws artistic influence from the 1970s Cambodian genocide and the country's endangered animals, like Asian elephants and bulls, as inspiration.

The building he paints on, located on the cor-

**Cambodia Town** *continued on page 8*



## RATES OF POVERTY BY RACE/ETHNICITY



2013 REPORT ON THE STATE OF CAMBODIAN TOWN BY UCLA

ner of Dawson Avenue and Anaheim Street, shares space with a beauty salon, a tax preparation service and a few Cambodian organizations. He wants places like these to get fixed up and beautified, and he says he hopes to bring “visibility and inclusion” through his artistic contribution. But while he sees his work as a celebration of culture, he may be unintentionally part of gentrification in Cambodia Town.

### The “G” Word

Depending on who you ask, you might get a different word to describe investors pouring money into city projects. From a beneficiary’s perspective, like, say, a luxury apartment developer, they may call it “revitalization.” They may also argue that driving up rent with their \$2,000-lofts will attract higher-income people to live in the city and ultimately stimulate the economy. Win-win, right?

Developments like apartments or new cor-

porate stores at The Pike Outlets are great and all, but not until higher property values push out low-income residents with rising rent. As housing prices continue to increase in the city, many low-income renters say incoming development is only a win for the rich.

That’s where the “G” Word comes in: gentrification. It’s a word that alienates the wealthier, incoming residents, which many say tend to lack ethnic diversity.

For Long Beach, diversity is everything. Mayor Robert Garcia even called it an “international city” once, with its collage of Latinx, black and Asian communities. But out of all that diversity, the Cambodian community is a one-of-a-kind. The city has the largest concentration of this population outside of Cambodia. It’s part of the Long Beach brand.

Arts Council for Long Beach hosted an informal meeting at a bar in the eastside that showcased muralists participating in their Cambodia Town Mural Project, where eight

selected artists paint murals throughout Cambodian Town. Shortly after, they encouraged dialogue on “preserving cultural assets” in the city, which was the bigger talking point that evening.

A woman, who admitted she’s a part of “the gentrification movement,” was bold enough to say people of color needed to just buy more facilities to maintain their cultural presence like she did for her art warehouse. As if it were that easy, many muttered to themselves.

“It’s a point well-taken, but you need money,” a man rebuttals as people pass him the mic.

And that’s precisely the problem: locals don’t have enough money to buy a home or shop.

### A Double-Edged Sword

Where else can businesses go than to the city for help?

Monorom Neth, who serves as Executive Director for the Midtown Business Improvement District, oversees businesses on Anaheim Street between Alamitos and Raymond avenues, where the highest concentration of Cambodian businesses sit. There are 183 active business licenses in this district, about 20 pending approval, and 15-20 delinquent on payments, Neth says.

Businesses in his district want to appropriate the money they collect off fees to make the area clean, safe and beautiful.

To keep it clean, the district hires Conservation Corps of Long Beach to pick up trash twice a week and power-wash the sidewalks once a week.

To keep it safe, the district is in the process of hiring a security company for the area, which may become controversial.

To make it beautiful, they have eight mu-



Gorlia Xiong in modern White Hmong dress on 2545 Adriatic Ave. in May 1999.

PHOTO VIA CALIFORNIA STATE LIBRARY/ARCHIVE

rals, those of which are part of the Cambodia Town Mural Project, and seven are in the district.

“Small business is the backbone of every community, and that is why you need to take care of it,” Neth adds.

Fixing up businesses would not only strengthen and preserve the Cambodian culture, the money collected from more tourism is the end goal.

But can tourism drive displacement?

Economy expert Christopher Thornberg, the founder of Beacon Economics, thinks so.

He explains that when a community increases its demand, people will take notice and want to be there. New, more affluent people — whether they’re individuals or businesses — would then drive up property values.

While more businesses can also translate to more job opportunities for the low-income residents in a city, Thronberg also says one could argue that the wealthiest people tend to benefit disproportionately from positive growth trends. Consequently, as mentioned before, wealthier people tend to lack ethnic diversity, which can change the face of a cultured community as minority groups often make up low-income populations.

“You can’t make things better and the same at the same time,” Thornberg says about communities wanting city development without displacement.

“There’s no simple answer here. But ... to try to stop economic progress in order to maintain a current lifestyle for low-income residents is ultimately self-defeating,” he says grimly.

### The Reality

Neth explains the cold, hard truth about the cost of housing: it’s not getting any cheaper. Understanding so, he bought a home in Bellflower because he couldn’t afford it in Long Beach.

For Long Beach Cambodian Americans that save enough money, they usually move to places like Cerritos, Lakewood or North Long



Youth from United Cambodian Community participate in a canning program in Long Beach in 1994.

California State Library/Archive



AVERAGE HOUSEHOLD SIZE BY RACE/ETHNICITY, 2007-2011

	CAMBODIA TOWN	CAMBODIA TOWN CORE	LA COUNTY
ASIAN	3.8	4.0	2.9
BLACK or AFRICAN AMERICAN	2.8	2.9	2.5
HISPANIC or LATINO	4.3	4.3	3.9
NON-HISPANIC WHITE	2.2	2.3	2.2
TOTAL POPULATION	3.6	3.7	3.0

Source: ACS 5-Year Estimates, 2007-2011

2013 REPORT ON THE STATE OF CAMBODIAN TOWN BY UCLA

Beach, he says.

While a common solution for Long Beach’s unaffordable rent is for tenants to move away, Tongratha Veng from Cambodian Association of American, a human rights organization, says his often low-income Cambodian clients tend to move in with each other.

“... There’s no place to sit usually,” he says after visiting Cambodian American homes.

He explains that they don’t move away because they get used to Cambodian markets, public transportation, culture and language accessibility.

Veng’s colleague, Gary Colfax, worked with a family where 22 people lived in a 2-bedroom apartment in Long Beach. He could not disclose their identity for privacy reasons.

These crammed living conditions lead to health problems, mental distress or even poor academic performance for youth who lack healthy study environments, they explain.

Although tenants have seen a spike in rent, the cost of housing had been rising long before.

In past city announcements for new downtown housing, many Long Beach residents were baffled by the little amount of affordable units relative to the high need.

“It’s never enough,” Neth says about the

amount of affordable housing availability. “But at least you’re doing something verses you do nothing.”

Neth hopes beautification of Anaheim Street will attract more tourism, and they can’t accomplish that without the city’s support. He hopes to attract Carnival Cruise tourists from the port precisely because they’re foreign visitors. They can stop by and spend their money in Cambodia Town, he says.

**What’s Next?**

Syprasoeuth, the muralist, says he honestly doesn’t know what will come with the incoming change to Cambodia Town, including his artistic contribution. He refers to revitalization without displacement as a balancing act. Having been displaced himself three times in Orange County apartments due to high rent, he experienced the negative results when a community becomes beautified and developed.

“Once things are fixed up, I’m sure things are going to go up a little bit. That just kind of comes with the territory,” he concludes. “I hope it doesn’t. It’d be great if it didn’t.”

*This article was produced in collaboration with KCET’s City Rising series, a multimedia series that traces gentrification through a lens of historical discrimination laws and practices.*



Little Phnom Penh Pacific restaurant and bakery, top, and Noble Fashion clothing store in Little Phnom Penh, above, in Long Beach.

Photos via UC Irvine, Southeast Asian Archive/Online Archive of California



Sayon Syprasoeuth’s mural on 2201 E. Anaheim St. was inspired by Cambodian seniors in Long Beach who wanted to celebrate artistic expression, like dance and colorful clothing, when many Cambodians were stripped of those freedoms during the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia during the 1970s.

Photo by Crystal Niebla





# THE PARADOXICAL NATURE OF GENTRIFICATION IN LONG BEACH'S GAYBORHOOD

The pluses of living near the coast is tempered by rapidly increasing rent.

By **Thomas Lick** *Vanguard*

When it comes to gentrification and the LGBTQ+ community, there seems to be two conversations — how so-called “gayborhoods” invite gentrification and how gentrification threatens gayborhoods’ existence.

Long Beach has been an unqualified gay mecca since the 1980’s. The city boasts a number of historic gay bars, hosts California’s second largest Pride celebration every year, and, most notably, Long Beach has six neighborhoods with the highest concentrations of same-sex couples in the L.A. area. The top being Belmont Heights, Plaza / South of Conant, and Eastside, these three neighborhoods are priced an average of \$278 per square foot of property, far more affordable (for now) than famously known gay neighborhoods like West Hollywood or The Castro in San Francisco.

The city’s LGBTQ+ friendly reputation is due to various pro-equality policies such as its contractor non-discrimination ordinance, trans-inclusive health benefits, and LGBTQ+ youth programs funded by The Center for Families and Youth.

The pluses of being gay and living in Long Beach are tempered by the rapidly increasing rent, a symptom of a thriving neighborhood. To date, the city has seen an 11 percent increase in one-bedroom units since last year, positioning it at No. 13 in the nation in terms of the most expensive rent-



A shrine dedicated to the 1969 Stonewall Riots pictured on New York’s Pride Weekend in 2016. Stonewall Inn was a gay bar on Christopher Street in Manhattan’s Greenwich Village prior to a police raid in 1969.

*Photo by Rhododendrites via Wikimedia Commons*

al markets, according the Zumper, a rental services website.

As affordability is threatened by gentrification, Long Beach residents who can’t afford the climbing costs of living are being displaced. This cause and effect presents unique implications for members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Many look to “the gays” as Fairy God Gentrifiers; moving into a neighborhood waving their magic gay wands and subsequently increasing the value of their surroundings.

Phillip Dominguez, a local realtor, explains, “Gay people are known for moving into an area AND taking care of the property ... I think in most cases homeowners do want gay people to move into their area because they know they’re going to increase its value.”

Dominguez acknowledges the rent increases do force some to relocate, including his friends, but believes the city is only now catching up to it’s worth. “Long Beach has been the cheapest beach city all along the coast of California and people are finally tapping into that,” he says.

**Top photo:** Long Beach Pride in 2013.

*Photo by Calvin Fleming via flickr.com*

In the 1980s, Long Beach saw a large influx of gay people move into the coastal regions of the city and establish roots. In 1985, L.A. Times writer David Haldane described the emerging gay district as “A once-sleepy neighborhood occupied mostly by senior citizens [which has] blossomed into one of the city’s most dynamic business and residential districts with a flavor all its own.” Haldane, like most, credits the gay community for enlivening a sleepy, crime-riddled, nook and turning it into something special.

But if LGBTQ+ folks incite redevelopment, are they immune from its negative effects?

Peter Moskowitz, author of the book, “How to Kill a City: Gentrification, Inequality, and the Fight for the Neighborhood,” answers this question in an interview he gave to fusion.net. “There are LGBTQ people who are gentrifiers. There are LGBTQ people who are [victims of gentrification]. The dividing line falls on race and income.”

Moskowitz asserts unearned advantages are what are empowering cis white men to benefit from gentrifying the gayborhood. “Whiteness gave a lot of them the power to flee the suburbs, just like whiteness gave their parents government subsidies to flee cities a generation earlier.”

It’s worth noting that contrary to myth, LGBTQ+ Americans face disproportionately high levels of poverty.

In one 2010 anonymous survey of Americans ages 18-44, gay men were found to have a poverty rate of 20.5 percent; the rate for straight men was 15.3 percent. For les-



bians, it was 22.7 percent, compared to 21 percent for heterosexual women. This can be the result of discriminatory workplace policies and hiring practices, and the staggering number of homeless LGBTQ+ youth making it difficult for LGBTQ+ persons to secure high-paying careers.

Adding to the complexity of the situation are population changes in Long Beach. Dr. William J. Crampon of a local think tank, Rethinking Greater Long Beach, crunched some numbers relating to Long Beach's gayborhood.

His statistics show that while the city at large has seen a 2 percent growth from the year 2000 to 2015, the historically gay neighborhoods have decreased in population by 3 percent.

More interestingly, residency amongst Caucasians has dipped 9 percent while the area boasts an 11 percent increase in Asian residents, 2 percent bump of African Americans and a 7 percent increase of Latino persons.

Robert Fox, a community organizer and property owner, hates that gentrification has become a bad word. For him, reinvestment is necessary to a thriving community, and in the 1980s fixing the city's ills was a

matter of life and death.

In order to rid the streets of crime and encourage a sense of community, Fox spearheaded the Alamitos Beach Neighborhood Association. He recalls, "We didn't have any options and the city wasn't helping us at all." His solution to the nightly gay bashings was to organize teams of six to ten people to escort people to their homes or cars after leaving the gay bars. Fox's next step would be to eradicate gang violence.

"We tried to do the right thing and bad things happened." To push gang members out, Fox along with tenants and landlords issued 30-day "just cause eviction" notices, he says. But what Fox didn't take into account was the fact that it takes three weeks for the notice to be posted by the Sheriff's Department to prompt a lockout. In the meantime, the tenants who testified in court became targets of gang retaliation. Each tenant endured brutal attacks, Fox says. Ever since, he adds, the city has moved away from 30-day just cause notices.

Today, Fox remains, to some, a controversial leader for his stance against rent control and just cause evictions. He believes such policies harm residents' safety and cause drops in housing units. Fox be-

## **"One of the things I've been thinking about in terms of rents going up has a lot to do with the maturity and personal development of gay men. How can a person develop if they have to have a roommate their entire life?"**

— Mark Waters, 43, who recently moved into his own place



The LGBTQ Center of Long Beach has been serving the LGBTQ+ community since 1977.

Photo by Thomas Lick



The streets are paved in rainbows in some parts of Long Beach.

Photo by Thomas Lick

lieves one solution to the affordable housing crisis lies in building more units to ease the demand subsequently lowering rent.

An often overlooked byproduct of gentrification is the neighborhood policing that comes from new residents imposing their ways of life. As the landscape of the neighborhood changes, so do the priorities and needs of the residents. What might have been accepted behavior could potentially be seen as out of place and be policed away by newer residents. The manifestation of this in gay neighborhoods reveals a heightened level of intimidation. Housing rights advocate, Maria Lopez deals with disputes between renters and landlords on a daily basis. In her experience, she's found that

typically when there's a dispute between neighbors, one person from the household is the aggressor. With gay couples, Lopez reveals "both members instigate the situation," and if it's an example of a same-sex male couple then any instance of male privileges is amplified.

After years of commuting to Burbank for work, Mark Waters was able to secure a job working for the city. Subsequently, Waters laments the fact that he, at 43, only recently understands what it feels like to be truly autonomous and living alone. "One of the things I've been thinking about in terms of rents going up has a lot to do with the maturity and personal development of gay men." Mark posits, "How can a person develop if they have to have a roommate their entire life?"

For Waters, the advantages of living alone are based on the freedom it affords. "When you have to have a roommate for years on end, you usually don't get that space. Especially if it's two men living together who are not romantically involved. There is no room for another relationship to really develop and blossom."

Maria Lopez is hopeful that the rapid gentrification and the sense of social urgency it creates can lead to a larger, inclusive component to the LGBTQ+ movement. "The gay movement has drastically changed from what the Stonewall Riots fought for and we must remain critical on that note as more queer people of color are suppressed by many social issues — housing being one," she says.

"We cannot separate ourselves into pieces or compartmentalize the multiplicity of our deeply interconnected struggles. As Audre Lorde famously said, 'There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.'"

This article was produced in collaboration with KCET's City Rising series, a multimedia series that traces gentrification through a lens of historical discriminatory practices. Visit [kcet.org/cityrising](http://kcet.org/cityrising).



# Time for LBUSD to Dropout of 'Pushout' Culture

With trauma at home, Karionne Stokes's grades suffered and teachers didn't offer any help.

By Sandy Garcia

When people hear the term dropout, they usually assume it's the student's fault that they're no longer in school. But what about the term "pushout?" For some students, the atmosphere in school can be so hostile the best or only option is to leave.

In 2015-2016, there were 609 students who either dropped out of Long Beach Unified or were pushed out, depending on whom you ask. Karionne Stokes was one of them.

Stokes, 18, attended Renaissance High School up until her junior year, the same year one of her teachers kicked her out of class.

"I had a pencil pouch on my desk and she made a big deal about it and she told me to put it away but other students had their phones on their desks so I felt my pencil pouch wasn't an issue," recalls Stokes. "She then took me outside to have a conversation and she told me, 'You are never going to be anything in life.'"

The words "pierced through me like a bow and arrow," she adds.

That incident happened just when Stokes was struggling with responsibilities at home, including having to look after her twin baby brothers on mornings when her mom wasn't home or needed her help.

Stokes says her dad didn't help much. She



Karionne Stokes, 18, poses outside Renaissance High School, the school she was pushed out from, on a rainy January day.

Photo by Sandy Garcia

also describes her home life as "not very caring." The police would constantly come to the house and her family had several social worker cases that meant Stokes and her three younger siblings were in danger of being put in foster care.

"Home doesn't really feel like home,"

Stokes describes. "My family is always arguing and we barely get along. My family has had several social worker cases and me and my little brothers are in danger of being put in foster care. Well, now that I'm 18 I don't have to worry about it but I still have to worry for my baby brothers."

All of that made it tough for Stokes to keep up with her school work, but it wasn't what she says kept her from graduating. In her junior year she was placed in geometry, even though she had not passed algebra the year before. Geometry also happened to be the class where she had the most absences and she says her teacher didn't offer to help. "When I would ask for help my teacher would say, 'You should be paying attention,'" Stokes recalls.

She felt discouraged and she felt picked on by the teacher. Stokes believes the school should've offered more resources and reached out to her. She is now in continuation school and working towards graduating.

Mayra Gonzales is a youth organizer with Californians for Justice - Long Beach, which advocates for things like bettering school climate and educational equality. They, Gonzales' preferred gender pronoun, define school pushout as "a consistent feeling of not belonging or not feeling worthy of any support, feeling dumb." They say when this happens students see "all these ways in which it feels better to not be in school as school can feel toxic."

Part of that involves relationships with teachers, something Gonzales says they see a lot in their work with students in the district.

"Suspensions and clashes with teachers are

**"Suspensions and clashes with teachers are a part of pushout, because a student doesn't have the same motivation to go to school. They might be like, 'Well, my teacher is just gonna' kick me out so I'm just not gonna show up.'"**

— Mayra Gonzales, youth organizer with Californians for Justice - Long Beach

a part of pushout, because a student doesn't have the same motivation to go to school. They might be like, 'Well, my teacher is just gonna' kick me out so I'm just not gonna' show up,'" Gonzales says. "If there is no motivation and you don't feel supported by your teacher, then why go to school anyways?"

Gonzalez points out that when it comes to conflicts with teachers, the blame isn't always or only with the student. They add that solutions can include a relationship-focused approach to education, where teachers are given training on how to connect to students better so they have the capacity to have a conversation with students on the issues affecting their lives.

The graduation rate for Long Beach Unified in 2015-2016 was 84 percent, up from the year before and higher than the state average of 82 percent. But the district still had a dropout rate of almost 10 percent for the school year, and according to a 2016 study by The Children's Defense Fund, while suspensions dropped by 53 percent in Long Beach Unified from 2011 to 2015, black and special education students in LBUSD were still suspended "well beyond the rate of any other subgroup of students."

The study noted, "Black students are also disproportionately pushed out of comprehensive schools to alternative settings."

Gonzales says, "Even though the district says it's not as bad as other districts, this is not a good enough standard. We should not have school pushout at all."

For Stokes, her experience with her unsupportive teacher has become an ironic source of inspiration.

"Looking back on my experience I can now see that it has helped me grow as a leader and an achiever," she says. "I refuse to step down to her low expectation for me because I'm better than that."

"I would advise other students that experience discouragement from teachers, staff, or anyone to use that as motivation to strive forward and excel, to show people that they are way more than the standards."

Elizabeth Campos

NBC4 News Intern,  
VoiceWaves Alumna

"We learned how to better communicate with people and how important it is to recognize diversity and be empathetic. I've made so many contacts and gotten doors open thanks to VoiceWaves."

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# Where I Fit in the Film Industry

After being smitten by a film directing project, this youth explains how her life goals could have changed had her first role model been a guy.

**By Jannai Simmons**

Being a filmmaker was not something that intrigued me as a child. It's actually a new love of mine that stemmed from my love for acting. For some reason, the concept of being behind the camera and actually creating something was always foreign to me. Perhaps it was because I never really saw anyone who looked like me in that part of the industry. Therefore, I never saw myself doing that type of work.

It was the summer of 2016 that made me realize that I wanted to be more than an actress. A good friend of mine asked me to be part of her movie. Hanging out with friends, getting reel and not having to audition? This was an opportunity that I couldn't pass up! So I took it.

I offered suggestions about who my friend could cast and where she should film. Small stuff, really. But soon I realized that she asked for my advice more than I offered it. It made me happy to know that I had a say in her production and soon she promoted me from "actress" to "second director." I was finally able to officially put my voice in and work on this movie that had somehow become my passion project as well.

The more I worked on this with her, the more I found myself immersed in the project. My friend had a lot of ambition going into this project, but she was very underprepared. So to help her out, I began going home and doing tons and tons of research. YouTube, of course, was my natural go-to and was surprisingly abundant with film

knowledge. I watched videos that taught me how to make better scripts, how to properly edit footage and that the proper term for "second director" was co-director. Who knew?

The more I learned, the more excited I became, and soon I felt like I could take on the world. It all came so naturally to me that it was silly for me to even think I couldn't do it. I remember sitting on her couch after coming down from the high of being "on set" (aka her backyard), and she turned to me and said, "What should we do after this?" I shrugged. I had never thought that far ahead. But once I started, I couldn't be stopped.

Unfortunately, the project never made it. Halfway through the movie she became too busy, summer ended, people dropped out and it was never salvaged. The project washed away with many people, but my love for the production had latched onto me like a leech. I decided that although I felt almost dependent on her to make the next move, I wasn't. I still wanted to make films and I didn't see any reason as to why I couldn't.

Now, I'm going to be honest. I never really looked into the directing profession so I never knew about the gender ratio imbalance in the industry, and because I didn't know that it was run by men, I found the profession to be something that I, as a girl, could do.

For the silliest reason, I thought I was just too young and lazy and that making a film rather than acting in one would be too overwhelming for me. I simply assumed I wouldn't be able to handle all the work. But the first time

seeing someone who could handle it, this person (which was my friend) was not only young and female, but what a beautiful coincidence that she was of color too.

It's no secret that there is an alarming lack of females in the industry. We just saw it in last year's Emmys that only three out of the 25 directors nominated were women.

A 2017 study by the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film also shows that women make up 7 percent of directors in the U.S.

Of course with every study comes theories as to why, and out of many of them, an analysis by Simon Cade is the one that I ponder about the most. He made a video on YouTube titled "Filmmakers have to be MALE," where he goes in-depth on the attempt to answer the reason behind the gender ratio imbalance. In the video he states, "I don't know how different my life would be if the tables were turned. Imagine if Hitchcock, Spielberg ... were all female. Would I

be less likely to pursue filmmaking?" My first influence was my female friend. What if she was a guy? Would I still have been as inclined to pursue this profession? Unfortunately, I can't test this, but it's thought provoking.

As previously mentioned, I was never aware of the gender ratio imbalance, therefore it never affected me in the way it has many others. But now that I know of it and am choosing to continue despite my disadvantages, it only makes me want to work harder at it and perhaps be one of the greats. I don't want to be one of the best female filmmakers, I want to be the best filmmaker, period. And that's where I think I fit in.

**"I never knew about the gender ratio imbalance in the industry, and because I didn't know that it was run by men, I found the profession to be something that I, as a girl, could do."**



Jannai Simmons, 17, lies on the floor practicing low-angle shots for a photography training workshop at St. Luke's Church in Long Beach on Aug. 21, 2017. Simmons attends Long Beach Polytechnic High School, and enjoys acting as a hobby. She aspires to become a film director after helping a friend make a short movie.

Photo by Jordyn Saunders



# VIP RECORDS EVOLVES TOWARD A NEW VISION

During the store's 40-year tenure, the Long Beach milestone provided a hub for hip-hop's titans, a safe space and a creative sanctuary for local youth.

By Elizabeth Campos

On the corner of Pacific Coast Highway and Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue resides the building that had long-inspired youth of color and impoverished people in the form of a tape, CD or vinyl. This building, The World Famous V.I.P. Records, showed the people of Long Beach to dream big in the music business for almost 40 years.

The story of how a young Calvin Cordozar Broadus, Jr. – gang affiliated and often incarcerated – rose to fame epitomized this dream. In 1993, V.I.P. Records was put on the map when Broadus, better known as Snoop Dogg, released his music video “Who Am I (What’s My Name)?” where he’s seen standing atop of the building rapping next to V.I.P.’s iconic vinyl sign.

While many regard V.I.P. Records as a milestone in Long Beach (so much so that the city proclaimed it a historic landmark), the store’s famous sign was finally taken down this past January despite a long battle from the store’s owner and supporters. In recent years, many worried a legacy might have been lost.

## ‘Ain’t Nobody Messing With the V.I.P.’

What was initially a record store in “eastside Long Beach,” the label ascribed to areas east of the 710 freeway at the time, turned into a place for youth and aspiring artists, and the neighborhood appreciated it.

For the soft-spoken-yet-tough “Martin Luther King Jr. baby,” V.I.P. Records owner Kelvin Anderson shined a give-and-get respect motto for the community to follow during testing times -- including during the 1992 Los Angeles Riots.

It was around 1 p.m. on the second day of the riots when Anderson saw a crowd approaching a liquor store across the street. After seeing the crowd loot the liquor store, he closed the front gate of his store, and a man approached him and said something that reaffirmed the respect the community had for his record store.

“Man you got nothing to worry about,” the man told Anderson, “ain’t nobody messing with the V.I.P.”

Anderson’s love for Long Beach translated into a recording studio -- a creative space that aimed to keep people out of trouble.

Even before the riots, the era had been among the most turbulent for Long Beach. Gangs were warring over turf, families were jailed, youth were fatally caught in the violence and crack reigned as king, residents recalled in interviews. But in the midst of all the trauma stood a music sanctuary.

“I opened the studio because of violence,” said Anderson.

42-year-old Steven Richardson grew up in Long Beach’s classic “eastside” where he saw all of the need for a studio. “I learned how to dodge when I was about seven or eight because guys would shoot semi-automatic weapons,” he said.



The Long Beach City Council voted unanimously to designate the The World Famous V.I.P. Records sign as a historical landmark on Dec. 19, 2017. The sign has been taken down to be restored and relocated.

Photo by Crystal Niebla



The World Famous V.I.P. Records owner Kelvin Anderson talks on the phone in his downsized store in Long Beach on Nov. 7, 2017.

Photo by Crystal Niebla

Making short pauses and letting out long sighs, Richardson recalled it all, the Latino factions versus Cambodian gangs, the Crips fighting against others, each vying in a battle royale of survival, something that Richardson described as “warrior culture.”

“Young men have this angst built up and if they don’t have the opportunity or means, they go out and do whatever they need to do because they need to survive,” he said. “Guns and access to them was paramount and that’s what people used to prove their point,” he said.

Inside V.I.P.’s doors was a safe haven for gangster rap fans: kids dancing, singing, rapping and recording at the studio. Anderson said he strived to make sure that the safe space served its purpose, leading to the emergence of renowned hip-hop artists such as Snoop, Warren G and Nate Dogg.

“I’m sure that I kept some people out of jail and probably out of the cemetery back then because V.I.P. was kind of like a no-fight zone, and we had people from all different neighborhoods,” Anderson said.

For some, it may come as irony that the epicenter of gangster rap and G-funk was the safest place for youth to crowd; the genre was blamed for much of the decade’s violence, including the Columbine High School mass shooting.

In actuality, the store remained, in residents’ words, a “mecca” for gospel music and knowledge.

“Culture around V.I.P. was not only the gang culture,” Richardson said, “it was just people that loved music, that loved our city, that loved our community and gave knowledge to our community to uplift.”

## Preserving a Legacy

Vinny Martinez, a 25-year-old music producer from the “eastside,” walked by on a recent fall day to the now empty V.I.P. Records building and the other businesses surrounding it. When he was younger, the store was the go-to place for him and his friends.

“It’s about the preservation of the spot,” Martinez said. “Not what it was, but what it needed to be.”

With a combination of rising rent and the music industry’s switch to digital, which prompted a decline in sales, V.I.P. Records owner Kelvin Anderson downsized his store and moved to another space within the same plaza in 2012.

In recent months, he has led a popular effort to preserve his store’s famous sign and oppose having the store’s original location replaced with a 7-Eleven convenience store.

“Gentrification happening 2 the original SnoopDogg, [Warren G] home by 7eleven,” read a tweet from V.I.P. Records.

After a long battle, to his supporters’ dismay, 7-Eleven is now in business there, though Anderson continues to break ground in other ways.

The Long Beach City Council unanimously proclaimed his sign as a historic landmark in December after Anderson applied for status in June last year.

So far, the city has given \$50,000 to Anderson, which he is using to move forward with his vision for a new arts and technology center equipped with a music studio, radio station, and gift shop, even if not to be founded at its ideal, original location.

“VIP family we have secured a 5000 sq foot space 4 A VIP Multi Media/Creative Arts center & business incubator,” reads a recent tweet from V.I.P. “We need you for a fundraising concert for the center. Let’s invest in our youth!”

In the tweet were tagged familiar names: Snoop, DJ Quik, Daz Dillinger, Warren G and others.

— Crystal Niebla contributed to this report.



# VISIONS OF A SANCTUARY CITY

Long Beach immigrant families weigh in with their vision of an ideal sanctuary city

By Michael Lozano

The word “sanctuary” has been thrown around a lot in recent months -- but what does it actually mean?

In California, the term has so far come to be defined by the California Values Act (Senate Bill 54), which prohibits state and local law agencies from acting in any way like immigration enforcement, in effect curtailing deportations of undocumented persons.

With the act now in effect as of Jan. 1, police can not inquire about someone’s immigration status. State or local enforcement can neither pass on certain information to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officials.

But Long Beach is tinkering with its own sanctuary policy, activists say, “to fill in the holes” and provide further protection by:

- Establishing a Deportation Defense Fund.
- Prohibiting police collaboration with ICE, except in extreme cases such as human trafficking.
- Prohibiting city resources from being used to assist with deportations.
- Preventing all city agencies, such as the health department, from sharing sensitive information with ICE.

The preliminary proposal is currently in deliberations between city agencies and various community groups making up the Sanctuary Long Beach Coalition and it’s likely that a final plan will be voted on sometime by end of winter. Advocates are feeling optimistic.

“We did some *huelgas* (marches) and it did work because California is now a sanctuary,” says Maria Luisa Pulido Vargas, a Long Beach immigrant from Mexico. “But we want more because in reality we need more protection. We need for the city to support us.”

“Without their help, it’s going to be a bit harder to achieve victory.”

We asked four immigrant family members what their ideal vision for a sanctuary city entails.

## Norberto Lopez

23, activist based in Long Beach for past decade. From Guadalajara, Mexico. Left at age 1 in 1995. Has DACA.



By becoming a sanctuary city these residents will be protected and be feeling safe in their home.

Sanctuary to me is where there’s not a collaboration between the police dept and ICE. Where you don’t hear about deportations... A safe city where families can stay together regardless of immigration status and they don’t have to be afraid of police. If something happens to them they feel free to report it.

I know my family, they didn’t call the police one time their home got broken into because they were scared, they thought, “what if they come and get us?” This was a long time ago. Now they’re U.S. residents...

But today, I have DACA [a protective status for those who arrived as children] and I’m protected from deportation for now until my permit expires. But after Donald Trump became president, some of those old fears of when I didn’t have any documentation came back. Like the fact that I’m now checking my rear mirrors to see if there’s any police behind me or I see a police and I get nervous. Those are fears that came back after he took office. Even with DACA, this fear of travelling within the United States came back.

## Astrid Quirarte

17, student at LBUSD. Parents left Mexico City in 1985 and lived undocumented in U.S.



The ideal sanctuary vision would be the city giving immigrants the opportunity to be themselves, the opportunity to be treated as equals and the opportunity to be able to have the same resources as everyone else because they are just as hard working.

A lot of people don’t understand what the immigrant struggle is like. A lot of people accuse immigrants of being lazy, just relying on social welfare saying that they don’t pay taxes. The reality is my mom paid taxes while being undocumented and she didn’t expect anything in return. A lot of people just aren’t educated on what it’s like to grow up in an immigrant household.

When my aunt came also from Mexico, she was undocumented and she was a hotel worker.

A lot of times, she was facing inequalities at work and complaints, and she was always afraid to speak up about it. She always let it slide because she didn’t want to get in trouble, because there would be repercussions.

Undocumented people need to really feel safe going to police stations knowing that the police isn’t going to be collaborating with ICE. Sanctuary policies are actually going to enhance public safety. So many people refuse to go to the hospital or report any crime against them for the fear of any repercussions.

## Maria Luisa Pulido Vargas

43, mother, worker, and student living in downtown Long Beach. Left Zacatecas, Mexico in 1994. Has work permit and is fixing green card.



If we had sanctuary, people would feel more secure, have the freedom to even go to the store without so much fear -- same thing for going to the schools, just as people avoid going to hospitals for fear of being arrested by immigration. It would be ideal if all the city was a sanctuary.

I know people who say they feel fear... when even a police merely drives by them, especially now with recent talk about more tough immigration policies. They feel it more.

As for going into schools, I truthfully have a ton of fear, as do many people. More than anything, it is because of the fear that is felt by the children. Our children, if they see us worried then they can’t even concentrate in school. They are worried about *la migra* taking their *papas*. That’s what worries me most... The children fear we will get arrested.

The most healthiest thing would be to have sanctuary. That way, the mothers can feel more free to visit schools with the *papas* and the children would feel more *libres* being in school.

## Safir Wazed

28, master’s student in business strategy at USC, living in East Long Beach. Left Dhaka, Bangladesh in 1997. Currently protected under DACA program.



In a sanctuary city, we’d have a working economy driven by diversity, where your status doesn’t matter but you’re nonetheless a contributor -- and it works; where everyone’s protected regardless.

Long Beach is one of the most inclusive places I ever seen. Regardless of the immigration climate, it’s always been very open to everybody... That goes from authorities all the way to residents and everyone in between.

Here, everyone believes we’re all trying to work hard and contribute... It’s not let’s work towards a sanctuary city -- we’re already a prime example of a great template of a sanctuary city that works.





The sense of freedom and camaraderie fills the air at the skate point at Bixby Park on New Years Eve 2016.  
*File photo by Thomas Lick*



**Above:** Children joined adults rallying for Puerto Rican humanitarian aid at Harvey Milk Promenade Park.

*Photo by Rudy Cardoso-Peraza*

**Right:** A youth spray-paints a canvass during an art activity with the Be S.A.F.E. program at Admiral Kidd park on Aug. 25, 2017.

*Photo by Crystal Niebla*

# #ThisIsLB

From youth intervention to protests, Long Beach is more than just a tourist destination. Here is a photo essay compiled by VoiceWaves Youth Reporters.



Young dancer and model River Collins pops their collar, "feeling themselves" at the AIDS Assistance Thrift Store on Oct. 23, 2017.

*Photo by Abel Avalos*



A boy plays a patriotic drum during a rally for Puerto Rico at Harvey Milk Promenade Park on Oct. 3, 2017.

*Photo by Rudy Cardoso-Peraza*

