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Nora Drake

A Complex Community

The seaside community of Isla Vista has a rich history that includes both lasting environmental impact (the founding of Earth Day) and troubling conflict (riots, violence and destruction). A new exhibition at the UC Santa Barbara Library shines a light on the small town and examines its rapid expansion over the past four decades — the good, the bad and everything in between.

"Isla Vista: Building a Community 1970-2016," in the library's third floor gallery, uses photos, hand-drawn posters, census records and even audio recordings to tell the comprehensive story of IV, as it's long been known to locals and residents.

In addition to scouring the Isla Vista Archive, part of UCSB Library's Special Research Collections, head exhibition curator Danelle Moon and her team of archivists sought historical perspective from current and past Isla Vista residents, and borrowed photos and other mementos that are featured in the show.

"What we're trying to do with this exhibit is to point out the importance of community building in Isla Vista," explained Moon. "It's really about looking at a very diverse community and understanding that they're not homogenous."

In 1956, Isla Vista boasted a population of 356, Moon noted, compared to nearly 15,000 who today call it home. As the population grew, so did the density of students living in the half-square-mile of land, which inevitably caused conflict with long-term residents.

As the exhibit reveals, Isla Vista's history is punctuated by political protests, conflicts with police (which led to the creation of the community-focused IV Foot Patrol in 1970) and numerous failed attempts to incorporate the area and make it an official city.

The real story is that Isla Vista is a diverse community with complex needs," said Moon. "It's a contested community in many respects, because, as this exhibit shows, the residential population and the youth population have sometimes had difficulty getting along."

Organized by decade, the exhibit offers a chronological view of Isla Vista, from the town's early beginnings as an inexpensive, unregulated place for students to live (often in makeshift dwellings or vans) to the apartment-building frenzy of the 1970s, to its current status as a conflicted town in an idyllic setting, sitting on the precipice of potentially major change.

Assembly Bill 3 (AB3), which will decide whether to create a new community service district supported by taxes, goes before Isla Vista voters in November. Moon chose to include language from AB3 in the exhibit to illustrate the current political climate.

"We aren't trying to make a statement on how people should vote," she said. "We just want to present the information about the upcoming ballot initiatives to show what's going on in IV now."

Over the next two months, the UCSB Library will host additional programming focused on Isla Vista and the community. An opening reception for the exhibition will take place Thursday, Oct. 27 at 5 p.m. "Democracy Matters: The Road to Self-Governance in Isla Vista," a talk by Alice O'Connor, UCSB professor of history, will follow on Nov. 3. And a moderated panel featuring Isla Vista residents is slated for Dec. 1. All events are free and open to the public.

Moon hopes the exhibit will encourage further discussion and reflection, and inspire current Isla Vista residents to consider their own historical legacy.

"There hasn't been a lot of documentation of Isla Vista since the 1990s," she said. "We're trying to initiate more community building programs. This is an opportunity to present a slice of history and to hopefully build a stronger connection with the community."

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