

*By Kristin Bender, Journalist*

A new documentary slated to run at the Oakland International Film Festival drives home the point that it's going to take a village to solve homelessness in Alameda County.

"A Rising Tide," a 2-hour documentary by Oakland filmmaker Cheryl Fabio, brings to light why nearly 10,000 people are homeless in Alameda County and why the number of unsheltered people grew by 22 percent between 2019 and 2022.

"It's not a city problem, not a county problem, not a government problem rather, it's a problem of humanity's inability or unwillingness to get involved," said Fabio, who lives in Oakland.

The film, which was made during the pandemic, was born out of a conversation Fabio had with Dr. Christine Ma, the medical director at UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital and a pediatrician with the hospital's Encore Medical Clinic, which addresses the health needs of homeless children.

Ma is also part of the UCSF Benioff Homelessness and Housing Initiative, which is "at the center of a movement to shape homelessness and housing research with an equity lens, partnering with the community and ensuring the involvement of people who have been homeless."

"When I first interviewed Dr. Christine Ma, she described this avalanche of folks falling off a cliff into homelessness." Said Fabio. "It was heartbreaking. I knew what she was saying was true on the street."

Fabio interviewed Ma because she was working on writing reports for Alameda County to update the public about how Measure A1 funds were spent. Measure A1 was passed in November 2016, with 73 % of voters agreeing to pass the initiative that designated \$580 million in general obligation bonds for affordable housing.

Fabio said she conducted about 8 interviews with various stakeholders for the report.

"It was (Ma) who had an analysis that hit me in my bones because it was so true," said Fabio, adding that she wrote about 5,000 words that were cut down to about 500 words for the report.

Other parts of the film center on educating the public about homelessness, how it happens, and what each person can do to help their fellow man and woman get back on their feet.

"I started this project with the belief I could get it done with no money and no connections at the time. But I related to how timely and how powerful (a film) could be to turn the conversation around, to move folks from statistics to humans with hopes and dreams," she said.

Fabio said she had a clear goal in mind while making the film.

The main goal is that A Rising Tide impacts how the public thinks about and talks about homelessness," she said. "From that changing narrative comes a different approach to solutions. "The investment must be made. Our representatives must prioritize housing as a human right and a fundamental need for all humans, and we are all human."

The film also touches on the fact that in 2019, 50 % of Alameda County's homeless population lived in Oakland. Of that population sector, 70 % were African American. These percentages decreased to 43 % by the Point in Time count in 2022, given COVID relief efforts and additional resources. But now that eviction moratoriums were lifted in July, homelessness is projected to increase again.

The count included those who are forced to sleep outdoors, in vehicles, tents, or makeshift structures, as well as a count of people living in shelters, transitional housing, and safe parking programs.

“My goal was to change the conversation, for people to stop saying you are homeless because you have a mental health crisis or that you are an addict,” said Fabio. “That’s not why folks are homeless. That’s not why Black folks are homeless. Black folks are homeless because there has been this history of wealth stripping in the Bay Area, and wealth stripping looks like redlining. Wealth stripping means you can’t get a job even after you have worked for 30 years.”

Asked about how she came up with the title of the film, “A Rising Tide,” Fabio said that the phrase "a rising tide lifts all boats" is linked to the idea that improvements in the general economy will benefit all involved in that economy.

The phrase is commonly attributed to former President John F. Kennedy, who “used it in a 1963 speech to combat criticisms that a dam project he was inaugurating was a pork barrel project. But the phrase can actually be traced back to Henry B. F. McFarland and his work "The Man by Man Rise of a Race of Men."

“A Rising Tide” will show from 3:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. on Sept. 21 during the Oakland International Film Festival at the Grand Lake Theater in Oakland, CA.

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