



A SAFE

THROUGH ROSE-COLORED GLASSES,

IV is paradise. The mornings are serene, the sun casts a warm glow that carries through the day, and the nights are vibrant and lively with groovy music blasting from one end of Del Playa to the other. This youthful, seaside community is hard to beat, and there's really little to complain about. But there's a flip side that is easy to forget in the hustle and bustle of our day-to-day lives. We fail to notice the fundamental elements of a town that IV lacks: a public library, sufficient streetlights, and most importantly, an inclusive, central gathering space that serves the needs beyond the students that predominantly live here.

"It's the beloved community," Diana Collins Puente described to me about Isla Vista, smiling, as we sat outside of the newly established IV Community Center. As the afternoon sun began to dip below the horizon, students whizzed through the Loop on their bikes, heading home after a long day and taking little notice of the small blue building that stands in the heart of IV.

Over the past five years, Collins Puente has become well acquainted with this beachfront town. Currently serving as the director of the Isla Vista Community Center, Collins Puente was initially recruited by a friend who believed she could positively contribute to and support the community following the 2014 Isla Vista tragedies. Previously, she has worked at UCSB's Associated Students (AS) as the IV Community Advisor. Collins Puente's passion for community improvement is driven by her personal background.

"I'm from Guatemala originally, and I lived there during the civil war, and that

PLACE TO LAND

ISLA VISTA CO-CREATING COMMUNITY SPACE



WORDS // JANET WANG PHOTOGRAPHY + DESIGN // RACHEL DENG

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has profoundly shaped my worldview and my feelings about being a community leader and activist and the power we have as a community to come together to make change happen,” she said.

According to Collins Puente, the Community Center has been a drawn-out endeavor, with proposals of a centralized space first recorded over 40 years ago. But with insufficient funding coupled with the lack of a tangible space, efforts have always fallen through. Part of this has been due to the nature of Isla Vista’s lack of official governance. “That’s the thing about being an unincorporated community—who then takes charge of this?” she questioned. “There isn’t a clear person or organization to hold space for any of these community initiatives.”

However, with an established building, advisory board of nine community advocates, and the support of local and government leaders, plans for a community space are underway. Although the Pardall Center and UCSB campus offer

gathering spaces for events, meetings, and workshops, a center in IV may tackle the issues of practicality and access for all.

“Sometimes when you have something at 7 or 8 p.m., you might not want to go all the way to campus unless you’re already in the group or organization hosting it,” AS External Vice President of Local Affairs Christian Ornelas stated. “I’ve been wanting to go to a heels-dancing class that they do, but they’re always out on campus. Maybe we can bring them out, and catch me in some heels,” he chuckled.

Ornelas, a fourth-year Environmental Studies major, has been involved with AS since his sophomore year. His role on the board seeks to incorporate student voice into programming at the Community Center. Through a personal perspective, Ornelas has noticed a stark disconnect between certain groups that co-inhabit the town but often feel brushed aside.

“From the Spanish-speaking community, which I’m a part of, I’ve personally been able to hear narratives of Latinx folks who go and pick up the cans from recycling and stuff,” he said. “They tell me that IV isn’t a great place to be and that people are mean to them—we pride ourselves on being so environmentally conscious, but some people are overlooked.”

A majority of us have developed a one-dimensional perspective when it comes to IV as a community, and Ornelas isn’t the only one who has observed how the town we comfortably call home can often feel unwelcoming to others. Spencer Brandt graduated this past spring, but has stayed in IV since, using his position as the President of the IV Community Services

District to work toward creating local government and improving the community. Brandt emphasizes that although Isla Vista is a predominantly student-oriented town, there are families and long-term residents that get left out of the picture.

“This whole other population of people are living here and we sort of have, just in the way we socialize, segregated them from everybody else,” he pointed out.

Brandt also expresses that it is important to be mindful about the way we use IV’s space. For example, it’s not uncommon to see parks and play structures littered with crushed beer cans following weekend festivities, with little regard for the families that may be raising young children next door.

“This is a temporary place for many people, but it’s a permanent place for many as well,” Brandt reminded us.

For now, Community Center leaders are hoping that the new space will present opportunities to improve unity, connection, and visibility within Isla Vista. As the physical building is currently empty, next steps will address everything from figuring out how to turn the lights on to determining internal capacity. It’s a project that is building from the ground up.

Collins Puente has already received a plethora of suggestions for programming in the Community Center—cooking classes, gardening workshops, conferences, and more.

“It’s a very long and very beautiful list, and it speaks to the needs that have existed in the community for a long time,” she said.

However, she’s hoping to use these next few months as an experimental period, refraining from determining full-on programming and instead, see how the community responds to the space.

“Part of the reason why I don’t want to narrow it down too much is because we need to be creative about it and not

feel like we have any preset ideas,” she revealed. “We really have to embrace the opportunity to see it as an experimental space, to see it as a lab in some regards where we get to play a little bit and think about what it means to be a community.”

Still, board members are eager to plan for the future. Ornelas dreams of expanding the IV Open Market, an event where students and local businesses sell jewelry, art, and clothing. Inspired by the Los Angeles DIY art scene, Ornelas envisions a multi-part experience not limited to clothing and art, but also incorporating a local farmers’ market or even live music. Along the same lines, Brandt hopes to utilize the indoor-outdoor space and patio for live music. The Community Center has been a long time coming—and it’s a major win for Isla Vista.

“There’s always been a spirit of IV—if you go back to the push for cityhood or the push for creating public space, there’s always been a strong grassroots effort to accomplish these things and build community on our own terms,” Brandt stated. And through the Community Center, Isla Vista is taking a step forward to define its own terms of inclusion, creativity, and diversity, inviting all who inhabit this one-square mile to unite and connect.

“We are much more powerful [together] in being able to affect change rather than if we did this work as individuals,” Collins Puente admitted. “It’s up to us.” ■

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