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the housing
jackpot



This view of the "Truth" mural on the Odd Fellows' building was photographed from Mayor Brown's office balcony.

PHOTO: CARL ANGEL

Market St. mural dedicated to freed Black Panther

One might like to believe truth is an absolute, but truth is clouded by the subjective experience of whoever's trying to utter it. Truth has caused wives to leave their husbands, and some say it can set you free. Over the centuries, truth has cost some prisoners their heads. And somewhere in the wonder years, a 7-year-old's truth got him one heck of a spanking.

But in downtown San Francisco, on Market Street at Seventh, truth is now an absolute. One of the city's more renowned mural artists, Rigo, has made it so by spelling it out in its simplest terms — in huge black block letters trimmed in white against a gray background. Six stories up on the side of the Odd Fellows building, there is no denying "Truth."

"After Sept. 11 and after Oct. 7, when the bombing started in Afghanistan, I wanted to do something to address that," he said, "because truth is the first casualty in any given war. That was what got me started on this theme."

The 36-year-old native of Portugal is like a chaplain, marrying public art and social justice. On April 22, he dedicated his mural across from United Nations Plaza to Robert King, who spent 29 years in solitary confinement for allegedly killing a prison guard at the state prison in Angola, La. Two other Black Panthers accused in the case also were relegated to a 5-foot by 10-foot cell. According to literature distributed at the dedication, King wasn't even there when the guard was murdered.

In his own form of solitary, dangling from the Odd

Fellows building while creating the mural, Rigo said he began to contemplate the lives of King and King's two prison comrades, Herman Wallace and Albert Woodfox. Collectively, they are known as the Angola 3.

"Being up on the scaffolding, seeing the proximity to City Hall and U.N. Plaza, the mind wanders. There's a lot of time to think," Rigo said. "I thought, 'How can something so huge (truth) be kept out of the (public) mind?' They do it by keeping it out of sight. I thought, 'Wow, this mural could say something about that.' The idea occurred to me to dedicate this to Robert, but I was scared. My biggest fear was that it would come off half-assed, without the gravity that the situation required."

Rigo called King, who has been free now for 15

PHOTO: MARK EASTMAN



Robert King stands on the roof next to the mural.

months and travels on speaking engagements, trying to bolster the ACLU's efforts to seek justice for Wallace and Woodfox, who are still in prison. "Rigo caught King in between trips. Then, "it took a lot of volunteers to get the dedication to happen. It was incredible to me that someone who was so isolated could still get all these people together," Rigo said.

The ceremony was buoyed by 150 attendees and by Mayor Brown proclaiming it "Robert King Day." There were free granola bars, fresh plums and chocolate truffles (who could pass up that combo?) and bags of groceries for the homeless. It also featured four members of the Zaccho Dance Theater Group, who hung from cables suspended from the Odd Fellows roof like exclamation points between the letters of the mural, six stories above the street. "The idea," Rigo explained, "was to have them meditate on the wall for an hour or so, contemplating the idea of truth."

Said King: "A year ago, I couldn't imagine this ever happening. I'm overwhelmed, but not to the point where I can't focus on the broader picture. It's good to get flowers while I can still smell 'em. (But) I want to share them with other political prisoners."

King said he survived nearly three decades in solitary by convincing himself that "prison was prison was prison. It didn't matter if I was in minimum security, maximum security or whatever. It was tough for me. It's tough for others. (But) I don't like to compare hells."

Rigo, who wore a knit cap and a red "Free the Ango-

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