



# Laurie Lazer and Darryl Smith let a thousand artists bloom in the central city

*Their 509 Cultural Center is a wide-ranging wellspring of art and inspiration in the neighborhood*

BY MARJORIE BEGGS

WITH RAIN threatening on a cool winter day, Tenderloin residents Thomas Griffin and Cheryl Conti waited in a short queue to get their favorite pants fixed — at an arts venue like no other in San Francisco.

Seamster Michael Swaine, who teaches ceramics at Mills College and UC Berkeley, monthly sets up his treadle-operated White Rotary sewing machine on the sidewalk as you enter the Tenderloin National Forest. He repairs neighbors' clothes for free, calling his 11-year-old brainchild the Free Mending Library.

Swaine personifies the Forest and its nonprofit parent, 509 Cultural Center: artistically professional, uniquely modern and whimsical. Co-founded by Laurie Lazer and Darryl Smith 23 years ago, 509 Cultural Center has grown into a trio of enterprises that also includes the 509 Ellis gallery and the Luggage Store Gallery on Market Street.

"Laurie and Darryl have a rare, special thing," says Swaine, who, besides his mending service has had several solo ceramic shows at 509 Ellis and contributed to group shows at the Luggage Store Gallery. "They have a completely different relationship to their artists than other curators. It's all about what they're willing to say 'yes' to."

Besides saying yes to an eclectic collection of more than 1,000 artists, they've managed to persevere in the central city, a tough location for any small enterprise.

"Having lasted 20 years is in itself an accomplishment, I guess," Lazer said in a video celebrating the anniversary of their art venture. "But it may have just been our stubbornness."

Today, Lazer and Smith are rising stars. The December issue of San Francisco magazine calls them "pioneers in the mid-Market revival" and among the "cultural mafia — the 63 most influential impresarios, mentors, fundraisers and visionaries" in the San Francisco arts community.

Since Lazer and Smith moved to 1007 Market St. just after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, they've transformed a fledgling visual and performing arts venue into a destination that nurtures artists, many from the neighborhood, while drawing in audiences from the central city and far beyond — 2,000 people a month — and mounting 10 shows annually.

Lazer and Smith also made a silk purse out of sow's ear Cohen Alley, once a garbage-strewn, drug-infested cul-de-sac off Ellis Street near Leavenworth that they've been developing since late in the 1980s. Dedicated as the Tenderloin National Forest in 2009, it's a surprising green spot in the heart of the Tenderloin. As a dirty, dark alley rife with rats, the police averaged three calls a day about nefarious goings-on. Now, Smith estimates that 10,000 people yearly wander in to browse or attend performances, art openings, food fetes.

The space, 23 feet wide and 136 feet deep, is enclosed by residential buildings. It boasts lush plantings, a clay oven, an artistic stone path, birdhouses, dramatic lighting and murals that run several stories up the sides of the buildings.

The Forest, the Luggage Store Gallery and its gallery annex next door draw 25,000 people a year, numbers that enamor artists and funders, who are pleased but not surprised by Lazer and Smith's success.

"I love those guys," says Frances Phillips, who directs the Walter and Elise Haas Fund's arts grantmaking and its Creative Work Fund, which has twice funded projects of 509 Cultural Center, the official name of Lazer and Smith's nonprofit organization.

"I deeply admire their commitment to artists that's all a piece with their commitment to the neighborhood," Phillips says. The Forest? "A beautiful, quirky, playful addition to a dense streetscape."

Sculptor and installation artist Mi-



PHOTO BY MARK DONEZA

Laurie Lazer and Darryl Smith, 509 Cultural Center co-founders and directors, stand near a collapsible Pacific outrigger canoe — the handmade "baby" of artist Michael Arcega's "Baby and the Nacirema" exhibition at Luggage Store Gallery.

chael Arcega, whose "Baby and the Nacirema" exhibition at the Market Street gallery ran last year from mid-October through November, has known Lazer and Smith for eight years. He's impressed at how relaxed and professional they are.

"When I approached Laurie about this show, we bounced ideas around, let them marinate a bit, then nailed things down just two months before we opened," recalls Arcega, who has exhibited at the de Young, is an art department faculty member at Stanford and was a 2012 Guggenheim Fellow in Fine Arts in New York. "The special thing about Laurie and Darryl is that they're so casual, but they gave me permission and encouraged me to do whatever I wanted with the space." Such trust in the artist is rare, he says.

Over two decades, many major Bay Area foundations have supported 509 Cultural Center. So, too, have the prestigious Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts, California Arts Council, and the city's Arts Commission and Grants for the Arts, top arts funder in the Bay Area.

"Laurie and Darryl are so mission-driven, so pure, so clear about what they're doing," says Kary Schulman, executive director of Grants for

the Arts, a Luggage Store funder since 1991. "They're all about linking the community and the artist. They've fashioned a template that makes the creator of the art and the audience or participant resources for each other."

### ARTISTS MEET

Lazer and Smith, more than business partners, were a couple, briefly, in the mid-1970s after they met in a photography class at City College. She'd come to San Francisco from the Bronx, where she grew up. He, a native San Franciscan from the Ingleside, had been studying sociology on the East Coast, but returned to the city just as the nonprofit sector was exploding.

"Laurie and I connected in the class and, afterward, did some arts projects together," Smith recalls. "We stayed in touch, but we weren't a couple again for about 10 years."

During that time, Smith studied photography at the Art Institute. In 1986, he moved into the Aarti Hotel, the building that forms the east wall of the Tenderloin National Forest, their fancifully named art venue that has come to symbolize the neighborhood aesthetic.

TNDC bought the Aarti in 1981 — the nonprofit's first venture into rehabilitating deteriorating Tenderloin housing — and developed it as a place of



PHOTO BY MARK DONEZA

In the heart of the neighborhood, the Tenderloin National Forest's murals and lush plantings have replaced a squalid alley between residential buildings.

its time: a self-help, cooperative model with tenants improving the building themselves and sharing day-to-day management. Smith joined a handful of artists living there in a collective that took over the ground-floor space next to the alley, a former bar, as their work gallery. (The Aarti was reshaped again last March, opening after being rehabbed as housing for formerly homeless, at-risk 18- to 24-year-olds who are seriously mentally ill.)

Smith was still an Aarti co-op artist in 1988 when he had the idea that Lazer might be interested in joining the collective.

"I invited her to come check it out," he says. And the rest is history — their history.

"I never lived at the Aarti," Lazer explains, "but what they were creating there was so interesting — the people

were so diverse and I was really impressed by the co-op meeting."

In 1987, TNDC had become the collective's fiscal sponsor, allowing donations to it to be tax-deductible. Its first support came from Franciscan Charities, then soon after from Vanguard Foundation, Lazer says. Two years later, the Luggage Store Gallery got its own nonprofit status.

That was a busy year. At its height, the arts collective had 17 members, mostly Aarti residents, but by 1989, most had moved on. Lazer and Smith kept 509 Ellis going, dubbing the gallery the 509 Cultural Center.

The gallery was active, and Cohen Alley began emerging, albeit slowly, as an outdoor venue. Smith's room at the Aarti faced the alley, and he remembers bemoaning the waste of space, a precious commodity in the Tenderloin. He

and others cleaned it up, enough to use it to host birthday parties for neighborhood kids.

"Then we got involved with SLUG (the erstwhile S.F. League of Urban Gardeners) and started by planting a red-wood tree and a Japanese maple," Smith says. "We did some live art events and some installations, all pretty temporary." But Cohen was still basically an alley, a concrete slab with curbs.

When the AArti was damaged by the '89 earthquake, the artists were ousted from 509 Ellis. About that time, Lazer was pedaling along Market Street, she says, when she saw the For Lease sign on 1007 Market, an elegant, two-story building constructed in 1907. A clothing store occupied the basement, ground floor and mezzanine, but the top floor, the one for lease, was flooded with light and much bigger

than 509. Gold script on the frieze below the Victorian cornice dubbed the building "The Complete Luggage Store." "It was absolutely beautiful," Lazer says. She and Smith signed a 10-year lease, naming their new home, of course, the Luggage Store Gallery. When they were able to reopen 509 Ellis, in 1995, it became the Luggage Store Annex.

### ALLEY IS TRANSFORMED

Back at Cohen Alley, neighbors began participating in its transformation, letting Smith know what they'd like to see there. In 1990, Smith met Mohammed Nuru of the Department of Public Works, now its director.

"He found ways to help us develop the space," Smith says, "even giving us access to DPW's landscape artist for ideas and help." After years of negotia-

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## POET'S TOUR

## THE TENDERLOIN NATIONAL FOREST — Where the supernatural is natural

BY ED BOWERS

There is a Tree of Life located at Cohen Alley off Ellis St. called The Tenderloin National Forest. It is a little forest filled with a diversity of plants, just like a big forest, only in miniature.

It is planted where the leaves live before falling off.

Everything was once something else here; the Tenderloin National Forest grows from what was previously a cesspool filled with the last sob and squeeze of broken hearts and discarded syringes.

The Forest is a gated community now, protected much of the time by a huge iron fence; when it is opened to the public, a millennium of wisdom is revealed to those who stand outside. It gets good reviews from people who give the overall ambience of the Tenderloin a zero. Forests are sneaky that way.

You see, some trees live for thousands of years. That's a lot of wisdom absorbed in one little life form. They've seen a lot, the plants.

Nature sanctifies us, reminds of our origins.

The supernatural is natural.

Gaze at your face in the mirror then at a flower in the forest. What's the difference?

You are as nature made you and that is as weird and supernatural as it gets, especially if you

were forged in the Tenderloin.

Wild things run around Central City, roots pulled up long ago, their endangered species status reduced to ground zero by those who would ignore them.

But in The Tenderloin Natural Forest wild things are cultivated, tended to, watered and preserved and it points to and pays homage to our mother the ancient Earth.

People stay home and tend to their own gardens, protect themselves, abandoning those in the Tenderloin to the wild life of ghosts, demons and angels.

As for nature in its primal form, when greenhouse gases put a human heat on the globe, making it possible to produce a new stone age, nature like many of its residents needs protection from civilization.

So, some in the Tenderloin think that if crack doesn't get you, global warming will.

But no matter what happens we go back to the source.

Life is a womb until you're born and then it's up for grabs.

Your origins are Earth and Sky.

Even when homeless, alive or dead, you are Home.

The life force doesn't give a damn if you die. It just wants to play.

Yes, The Tenderloin National Forest is not big; neither are you, so it is possible for you to relate.

Preserved behind bars is what you are too; the bars may be invisible, but they are there.

When you look beyond the bars, you see yourself protecting yourself from yourself.

A few plants, birdhouses, palms, and some peace is what you will find.

If that's not good enough, go somewhere else; which you obviously have done as you read this from an important building that may be as large and distant from wilderness as yesterday's dinosaur.

But if you are a poet, check out the Tenderloin National Forest.

The spirits of the trees cut down to build San Francisco will bless you, or at least leave you alone.

This will offer you the opportunity to write about beauty before it wore a human face.

Follow the fallen homeless leaves scattered on the sidewalks of the neighborhood.

Perhaps they will lead you home.

Or to The Tenderloin National Forest.



PHOTO BY MARK DONEZA