

By Louis Medina

There is a proverb that says, "Don't despise the day of small beginnings."

This year, I have found myself relishing the small beginnings afforded to me by Pine Mountain Club's Center of the World Festival and Amateur Playwriting Competition in mid-August.

My short, 10-minute play, "Common Denominators," which won third place at the festival held at the Pine Mountain Club Gazebo, was just featured in the "Oildale and Beyond" conference at Cal State University Bakersfield last Saturday, Nov. 7, as part of a string of area-wide Oildale Centennial celebrations.

How my play landed a spot in a conference that also included country music great Merle Haggard as featured musician, and local author Gerald Haslam as keynote speaker, is a story full of good will, local pride and helping hands.

First, let me say that this year's Center of the World Festival theme of peaceful conflict resolution was inspiring, as my play is about resolving ethnic tensions in neighborhoods in flux. It is set in Oildale and features the tirades of a white, retired roughneck who is furious about being stuck with "Mexican" neighbors when a young Hispanic couple moves in next door. Pride in local oil history and the Oildale Centennial are mentioned in the play, which ends by having the roughneck find out he has more in common with his neighbors than he could have imagined.

"Common Denominators" got the attention of Diane Duquette of the Kern County Library, who lives in Pine Mountain Club and was in the audience. She encouraged me to promote it to organizers of the Oildale Centennial Celebration and sent an e-mail to everyone she knew on the planning committee. Before long, I was in conversations with CSUB event organizer Prof. Miriam Vivian.

She apparently had some concerns that the play might not go over well with the conference audience, as it deals with the white racism often attributed to Oildale area residents. Prof. Vivian asked the opinion of Dr. Edwin Sasaki, dean of CSUB's School of Humanities and Social Sciences, who read it and said, "We have to do this play." Prof. Mandy Rees, chair of CSUB's Theater Department, directed it.

When introducing "Common Denominators" during his opening remarks at the conference, Sasaki said, "I look at it as a short version, our own local version, of "Gran Torino," referring to the Clint Eastwood film about racial tensions in suburban America.

Probably my proudest moment at the Oildale Conference was when writer Haslam came up to me after the reader's theatre type performance--which featured PMC locals Bob Clark and Katherine King in the starring roles of the roughneck and his wife, along with three CSUB student actors--and told me, "Congratulations. It reads really well."

I am grateful to PMC local and Center of the World Festival organizer Dr. Shelia Clark for giving me a leg up as an amateur playwright. The opportunity has allowed my play to reach audiences beyond the PMC community.

Next year's Center of the World Festival's theme is Eco-Drama and challenges playwrights to develop short works dealing with the reciprocal connection between humans and the world around them. I've already started thinking about what I'm going to write, and I encourage other playwrights to participate. It's a wonderful opportunity to showcase one's work in beautiful Pine Mountain Club. I also encourage non-writers to become involved in this worthwhile festival as volunteers or sponsors. All hands on deck are needed. For more information, please visit www.centeroftheworldfestival.org.