

Clean air ambassadors use data to advocate for healthy air



BACKGROUND

This case study demonstrates how Green Together’s strategy for community engagement leverages Pacoima Beautiful’s existing programs like the Youth United Towards Environmental Protection (YUTEP) club described on the next page. The approach has empowered resident leaders to take on greater roles of public influence by strengthening their communication skills, climate literacy, and relationships with projects partners.

Interviews for this story were conducted in August and September 2021.

Pacoima Beautiful’s inaugural class of Clean Air Ambassadors, 2021. Photo credit: Pacoima Beautiful

HUONG TRAN attends high school with her friends in Sun Valley and is an active member of Pacoima Beautiful’s Youth United Towards Environmental Protection (YUTEP) club. Through YUTEP, Huong serves as a paid Junior Field Manager as well as a volunteer for Pacoima Beautiful’s COVID-19 vaccine program and community greening activities. Huong learned about the Clean Air Ambassador program from YUTEP. Her curiosity to learn about ways to help the community motivated her to participate in the Clean Air Ambassadors training.

Through the training, she collected air quality data in Panorama City and compared her data to that from Pacoima, Sun Valley, and North Hollywood. “I didn’t know how bad the air quality was and I wanted to know more about how I could help because I know air quality can affect your health just as bad as smoking,” said Huong. As a Clean Ambassador, she now understands the basics of air quality and its impact on community health. Huong credits the program with teaching her about technologies to monitor air quality, how to analyze data and communicate her results, and ways to improve her public speaking skills. While COVID-19 made it difficult to interact with other participants, she developed a deeper relationship and trust with Pacoima Beautiful staff and feels more tied to the organization. Huong plans to be a psychologist or nurse and continue to be involved in environmental projects as a hobby.



Huong Tran, picks up her air quality monitoring tools before beginning the Clean air ambassador program.

Photo credit: Pacoima Beautiful

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HUONG TRAN



Jenifer Fonseca walking through Pacoima with an air quality instrument hooked to her waist. Photo credit: Jenifer Fonseca

JENIFER FONSECA is a high school student in Sun Valley who is completing her senior community service with Pacoima Beautiful's Youth United Towards Environmental Protection club (YUTEP). Launched in 2002, students from local middle and high schools are recruited to participate in the youth group. The youth meet weekly to increase awareness of environmental issues, participate in public service projects, develop leadership skills, and prepare for

college. Jenifer first learned about the Clear Air Ambassador program from YUTEP.

Jenifer completed the Clean Air Ambassador program by collecting air quality data in North Hollywood. She acquired analytical skills to compare and contrast pollution levels in North Hollywood, Panorama City, Pacoima, and Sun Valley. Jenifer identified air quality disparities between the neighborhoods, with North Hollywood having fewer spikes in particulate matter. As an Ambassador, she feels equipped to use data to convey the air pollution challenges the community is facing. She also enjoyed the intergenerational learning and community-building opportunities offered by the program. Jenifer aspires to attend UCLA and become a neonatal nurse. She is excited to add her new skills in data collection and analysis, creating presentations, and public speaking to her resume.

“Data is key to getting our point across about air quality issues in the community.... The air monitoring made me open my eyes. I didn't know about how bad air quality is in Pacoima and Sun Valley.”

JENIFER FONSECA

OSCAR BARCENA was born and raised in Pacoima to parents who emigrated to the neighborhood in search of a better life. During high school, Oscar participated in Pacoima Beautiful's youth leadership program. The program introduced him to the environmental justice issues affecting the Northeast San Fernando Valley. Working with other youth leaders to propose solutions, Oscar became aware of the importance of community learning and the capacity to advocate for a healthier community.

“There's a lot of environmental issues and projects that we don't ever see or know about. Becoming a Clean Air Ambassador was my way to have that veil lifted.”

OSCAR BARCENA

Years later, Oscar, who holds a master's degree in business administration and works for LA Metro, was inspired to become a Clean Air Ambassador. He is part of the inaugural cohort of Green Together's Community Academia also developed by Pacoima Beautiful. The Ambassador program is an innovative part of the TCC Community Engagement Plan that recruits and equips residents to advocate for a healthier community. Ambassadors meet for 13 sessions



Oscar Barcena exercising near Hansen Dam in Pacoima. Photo credit: Oscar Barcena

and are trained to use scientific equipment to measure particulate matter pollution in the TCC area and surrounding neighborhoods. They learn to interpret the data, communicate about air quality, and advocate for data-informed clean air solutions. The most important elements of the program for Oscar are the relationships developed with other residents and Pacoima Beautiful staff, the opportunity to learn more about health issues confronting Pacoima, and the possibility of influencing other local projects.