

Leadership council members connect existing community networks



BACKGROUND

This case study highlights how the Green Together Leadership Council brings together a diverse set of community leaders who play integral roles in the Northeast San Fernando Valley by integrating and bolstering their varied experiences to share information and gather feedback on TCC-funded projects. The Leadership Council is a central part of Green Together's collaborative stakeholder structure — see page 38 to learn more.

Interviews for this story were conducted in October 2022 and February 2023.

Michael Centeno speaks at Tía Chucha's Centro Cultural, where he serves as executive director. Photo courtesy of Michael Centeno.

MICHAEL CENTENO has lived his whole life in Sylmar, a neighborhood bordering the Green Together project area. For the better part of two decades, he has been working with Tía Chucha's Centro Cultural, a nonprofit cultural center that supports Northeast San Fernando Valley residents in developing literacy skills and engage with artistic and creative outlets. The organization offers classes for youth and adults, hosts open mic nights, prints locally written poetry, and runs a wide variety of other cultural programming. In 2018, Centeno became the first paid executive director of Tía Chucha's after spending years as a volunteer.

In 2021, Pacoima Beautiful invited Centeno to join the Green Together Leadership Council — a collaborative body created to provide input throughout the TCC grant implementation process, which is composed of residents, business leaders, representatives of local nonprofits and anchor institutions, community leaders, and a local elected official. It was the first Centeno had heard of Green Together. Centeno thought that joining the Leadership Council would be a good opportunity to bring his experience engaging the community to the table while also becoming more aware of efforts to make the neighborhood more climate resilient.

Centeno has found it to be a beneficial experience, helping him to better understand the challenges people face in his

“The Leadership Council is a great opportunity to learn what’s happening in the climate change realm. My organization doesn’t focus on that work, but we are still part of this community and can help share resources.”

MICHAEL CENTENO

own neighborhood and the Northeast San Fernando Valley more broadly. In particular, he has gotten a better understanding of the challenges Spanish-speaking community members deal with, such as accessing services advertised only in English.

Centeno has also learned about the resources available to residents who face such challenges. As a member of the Leadership Council, he has learned about Green Together's programs, and he shares these resources with community members — starting with visitors to the Tía Chucha's bookstore. “We always encourage Green Together members to leave information on events and other resources in our bookstore, and when we have major events here, we let them know so that they can drop off flyers.”

While Centeno noted that he appreciates seeing all the

different organizations working to serve his community, he said he thinks more can be done to expand partnerships and coordinate all of the different efforts. “This experience has made me more aware of the community members and partners that are out there. We’ve shared resources, and it has definitely helped. But we could do more to be intentional with other partners.”

Centeno’s Leadership Council involvement has helped him — and, by extension, Tía Chucha’s — to become more integrated into the network of organizations working to transform the

Northeast San Fernando Valley community. He foresees these connections being helpful for the organization’s planned expansion from a rented space into its own building.

“We’re on a trajectory of growth. And this strong network can help us achieve our goals. We can learn a lot from each other and share resources, knowledge, and experience.”

MICHAEL CENTENO

WENDY THUM moved to Sun Valley from West Hollywood 13 years ago to buy a home. Since then, she has taken it upon herself to become deeply involved in her community. When a next-door neighbor noticed Thum’s strong community organizing skills and passion for helping others, she recommended that Thum run for neighborhood council. Thum took the chance to continue expanding her role in the community, and with her neighbor’s help campaigning, she was soon elected to the council. Ever since, she has chaired the Beautification Committee and often hosts community cleanup events. “It is so family oriented here, and everybody really looks after each other. When I set up cleanup events, everybody comes — and they bring their families. Everybody’s there.”

The Green Together Leadership Council is designed to bring together local stakeholders with varied experiences, skills, and interests. In contrast to TCC collaborative stakeholder structures in other communities, it must include one local elected official from the community. Pacoima Beautiful invited Thum to bring her organizing skills and neighborhood council resources to this role, which she has been doing for about one year at the time of this interview.

“With TCC, I get to discuss environmental initiatives that are based in reality. Having a big grant behind these ideas is quite persuasive when I’m talking with stakeholders in my council district.”

WENDY THUM

The role expands Thum’s outlets for environmental work beyond the Beautification Committee.

Thum’s experiences with volunteer work, her ability to motivate people, and her role on the neighborhood council have provided her with helpful resources as she serves on the Leadership Council. For example, she helped the Leadership Council develop its bylaws, drawing on her knowledge and experience from the neighborhood council’s process to create its bylaws. And Thum has broadcast information about Green Together resources and events throughout the community through her neighborhood council network. In return, she has gained a deeper understanding of other community members’ concerns and priorities — insight that can help her address issues in ways that fit the community’s needs and desires.

“Hearing people’s concerns, sometimes I realize that a problem is different from what I expected, and I need to learn new strategies for dealing with it to be successful.”

WENDY THUM

Thum’s roles on both the Leadership Council and the neighborhood council put her in a position to gather feedback from her neighbors and take action on their concerns. “I have learned a great deal,” she said. “Even after 13 years, I can always learn more about the culture of this area, and how to address problems that I might not have known about before.”



Wendy Thum leads a cleanup day in Sun Valley. Photo courtesy of Wendy Thum.