

Externship program provides Stockton youth with experience, skills, and income



BACKGROUND

This case study documents how TCC funding has launched the careers of three Stockton youth who graduated from Rising Sun Center for Opportunity's externship program, which organizes experiential learning opportunities at local organizations doing public interest work. For more on this program, as well as Stockton Rising's broader Workforce Development and Economic Opportunities Plan, see page 48.

Interviews for this story were conducted in the fall of 2023.

Leilani Vasquez (right) and colleagues tabling. Photo credit: A helpful passerby

LEILANI VASQUEZ is a Stockton native raised by immigrant parents from Mexico and Chile. Growing up, she would help out at her father's immigration and tax consulting business. Now she's an undergraduate at UC Davis and is concurrently enrolled in the medical assistant program at Cerro Coso Community College. Vasquez heard about Rising Sun's youth employment opportunities through her cousins, who have also worked there. "They told me about the great things Rising Sun provides to underserved communities. I was motivated to get involved by the impact I could have, particularly as a Spanish speaker."

Vasquez started out as a summer employee helping with energy and water efficiency installations. The summer job gave her and her colleagues wide-ranging experience: each day brought different learning and work activities, from educational presentations on climate resilience to phone banking, data entry, and other professional tasks. Sometimes, youth employees would be paired up to create presentations for the group: "We all taught each other, which also expanded my knowledge on water and energy efficiency. It helped us all build each other up."

After that summer, Vasquez participated in two externships. The first was at Rising Sun doing grant writing; Vasquez said it was more independent, self-driven work. "I had the freedom to work on my own. I researched grant opportunities to see which one was the best fit for Rising Sun." The second externship was with Reinvent South Stockton Coalition, where Vasquez helped increase her small team's capacity to do outreach in Spanish at a health resource event.

Vasquez has gained critical professional skills through Rising Sun's job training opportunities, including time management, communication skills, and confidence. Working with the organization has also helped her build an expansive professional network. And the program has also helped her develop financial responsibility by providing an income and workshops to learn how to save money. Ultimately, the Climate Careers program has helped Vasquez stay on track to achieve her goal of a career in the health field.

"It's taught me time management and how to prioritize, and it's motivated me to make sure I'm doing everything that will help me become successful in the future."

LEILANI VASQUEZ



CAROLINA RIOS was born and raised in Stockton. Her first exposure to the world of work was in agriculture, where she helped her parents — immigrants from Oaxaca and Chiapas — harvest green beans, topping onions, picking cherries, and more. Giving back to her parents, as well as her broader community, is a big motivation for Rios and has informed much of her professional arc.

That arc began at Rising Sun, where Rios first started working as a summer energy specialist helping the organization carry out its TCC-funded project to install energy and water

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efficiency upgrades at homes located in South Stockton (see [page 54](#) for more information about this project). Rios took this job shortly after graduating from San Joaquin Delta College with an associates degree in business administration and was drawn to the position because of the interest of helping the communities around Stockton. During her summer position with Rising Sun, she learned a great deal about the art of networking and refined her public speaking skills. Specifically, she learned that when pitching sustainability opportunities to residents, “the shorter, the better.”

After the summer position came to an end, Rios was eager to gain more work experience and applied to Rising Sun’s TCC-funded externship program. She was placed with Stockton Service Corps, “doing research, analyzing documents, and trying to build a sustainable plan to develop more ideas on how we could be more green out here in Stockton.” The externship helped her strengthen her organizational and analytical skills, as she had to be well versed in the planning solutions that were already out there, and think creatively about what was missing in her community.

As her externship came to a close, Rios realized that she was most professionally satisfied when she was working directly with communities. So she applied for a position to return to Rising Sun as a full-time program manager. In that position, she has helped recruit, interview, and hire summer energy specialists much like herself. She likes the work so much that it’s also where she sees herself professionally in the near future.

Beyond the skills she’s learned through Rising Sun, the income she’s earned has also been transformative. “With the money I’ve earned, I’ve been able to cover my expenses and help my parents with the rent. We were also able to move out from the one-bedroom home all five of us shared for a more spacious place.” In the long run, she hopes to use her income and the money she’s saving to get out of renting altogether, adding homeownership to her growing list of accomplishments.

“In five years, I hope to still be working at Rising Sun ... I’ve learned a lot through them, like how to be more green and how I can help my community.”

CAROLINA RIOS

EMILY PINEDA was also born and raised in Stockton by her parents after they immigrated from Mexico. Now she’s a sophomore at UC Merced, studying biology in the hopes of becoming a doctor.

After her first year of college, Pineda applied for seasonal work at Rising Sun helping with the energy and water efficiency installations. The job post on LinkedIn drew her attention because “it was something bigger than just a job — it had the possibility of turning into something bigger.” Though she wants to go into medicine, she saw the opportunity as a “stepping stone” that would enable her to gain work experience.

The summer work indeed turned into something bigger. In the fall, Pineda was hired on as an extern at Rising Sun, helping coordinate no-cost appliance replacements for Stockton residents over the phone. The remote externship position allowed her to keep developing skills from school, while earning income she could use to help defray her college tuition.

“Rising Sun helped me establish healthy boundaries, learn time management and organizational skills, and build connections with coworkers. That will be a great help in the future — you can’t be a surgeon working with others if you don’t trust or know them.”

EMILY PINEDA



Carolina Rios (5th from left) and Emily Piñeda (9th from right) at the Rising Sun “Slushi Day”. Photo credit: Rising Sun