

Planting trees and the seeds of green careers in Watts



BACKGROUND

This case study highlights how TCC investments in urban greening have empowered young Watts residents with technical skills, community engagement experience, and career inspiration. It showcases the stories of Eddie Guerrero and Maria Flores, two recent recruits for the Watts crew of North East Trees, the organization coordinating two urban forestry projects in Watts (Greening Public Housing and Greening Watts). To learn more about urban forestry projects in Watts, see [page 64](#).

Interviews for this case study were conducted in September 2022.

Eddie Guerrero and other North East Trees staff take part in a tree planting event at Gonzaque Village, a public housing community in Watts. Photo credit: UCLA Luskin Center for Innovation

EDDIE GUERRERO has lived in Watts throughout his 24 years. Growing up in a neighborhood without much green space, he spent little time in nature. But his grandma had a green thumb, and Guerrero absorbed her love of plants and trees as she helped to raise him.

Accustomed to sunny streets with little shade, Guerrero didn't think much of the lack of trees lining the streets of Watts before he joined North East Trees. "We lack natural environment here. We're surrounded by factories. So, we're planting trees, which is really important — but a lot of people just don't know how important it is. I think Watts Rising can raise awareness in a really positive way."

Working with North East Trees has given Guerrero a more nuanced perspective on how planting trees benefits communities like Watts. Learning about the biology of different types of trees — and the implications for how they should be planted — has inspired his career aspirations.

"In five to 10 years, I see myself working for CalFire," he said, referring to California's Department of Forestry and Fire Protection. "Everything I'm doing right now, when it comes to restoration, they do in wildland firefighting. Certain trees are more fire resistant than others. So everything I know about



Eddie Guerrero stands by a tree North East Trees planted in Watts. Photo credit: UCLA Luskin Center for Innovation

"It makes me really happy, being able to be part of this change in my community. I enjoy seeing the people sitting and enjoying the shade of the trees we planted."

EDDIE GUERRERO

the biology is very important when it comes to fire."

As a lifelong Watts resident, Guerrero was an ideal candidate for youth work opportunities at North East Trees because the organization seeks to hire people who live in the neighborhoods where they are planting trees.

Residents hired into these positions conduct community engagement to educate fellow residents about the benefits of planting new trees. For instance, before planting trees at the local community of Gonzaque Village, the young workers asked residents to pledge to help care for trees and provided information on how to do so.

After witnessing the effects of poor tree-planting practices in decades past, some residents worry about the damage large trees can cause, such as broken pipes and cracked sidewalks. Guerrero and his colleagues work to help residents understand that by planting the right trees in the right places, North East Trees can provide more shade and other benefits to the Watts community without causing damage.

MARIA FLORES has lived in Watts for over a decade. Although she had little exposure to nature throughout her childhood, she took initiative to explore the environment more as she got older, and she knew that she wanted to get involved in environmental work in her community. A temporary job at North East Trees — which soon became permanent — gave Flores the chance she had been searching for to engage her community while bringing more nature to Watts.

“Working with North East Trees has given me a lot of insight. It has opened my eyes to the importance of bringing nature into urban spaces, because especially in our area, we’re so industrialized.”

MARIA FLORES

Flores is doing more than planting trees. She is gaining technical skills and knowledge about tree identification and ecosystem restoration that she hopes will help lead to a long career in the environmental field. She is also building important relationships and more deeply learning what communities like Watts need.

Flores has generated valuable insights for improving urban forestry efforts, particularly in communities like Watts where some residents fear that large trees will tear up their neighborhood. Flores thinks there are ways to shift that point of view, including giving residents a say in what types of trees are planted and providing funds for tree maintenance beyond the first two years of establishment.

Guerrero also talked about the health benefits of trees, such as cleaner air and relief from extreme heat in a neighborhood facing higher temperatures than most of the City of Los Angeles. Guerrero described one street in particular to illustrate the effect of his crew’s work: “There was not a single tree on that street. National Geographic did a study of that particular street, like how bad the air quality is, how hot it gets, right? We went in there and planted about 40 trees on that street. And it looks amazing — the residents love it.”

“I always say that I want to change the world, and I was told to start with my community.”

EDDIE GUERRERO

“You would think everybody loves trees, but we definitely get backlash. Back in the day, they were planting trees without really knowing the biology of the tree and how it grows. When we explain the benefits, and how we’re picking the right species of trees and making sure that it’s planted the proper way this time around, people open up.”



Maria Flores works with North East Trees to plant trees on a residential street in Watts. Photo credit: UCLA LCI

“I honestly can’t see myself doing anything else. I definitely see myself in this field, taking on more roles, doing more community outreach, and really connecting with residents.”

MARIA FLORES