

# Street Team ambassadors build community, capacity and confidence



## BACKGROUND

This case study illustrates how the TCC-funded Street Team program, which employs Watts residents as community outreach ambassadors, fosters local leadership and capacity. Through the eyes of two Street Team members, their stories show how training and work experience help residents gain career-building skills and confidence. To learn more about the Street Team and Watts Rising's community engagement plan, see [page 47](#).

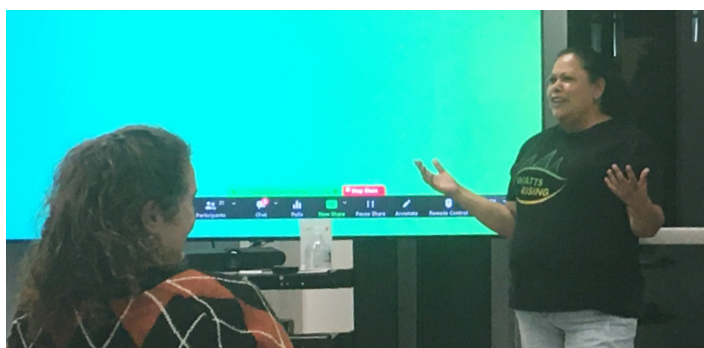
*Interviews for this story were conducted in January and February of 2023.*

Watts Rising Street Team members Anai Velazquez (left) and Mary Ann Cortez (right) table at an event for Watts Rising. Photo credit: Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles (HACLA).

**MARY ANN CORTEZ** has been involved in Watts Rising since she joined initial stakeholder meetings to apply for the TCC grant. Since moving to Watts in 1994, Cortez has raised six children — all of whom have attended Watts public schools — and built a career leading parent engagement efforts and events with the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). While she was initially skeptical about Watts Rising projects getting done, her investment in creating positive change in her community kept her coming back to the meetings.

**“I was always there during the first planning stages. And now I’m seeing it all come together. Like, I was one of the first to drive the electric vehicles.”**

MARY ANN CORTEZ



Mary Ann Cortez presents at the Watts Rising public forum. Photo credit: Luskin Center for Innovation.

Cortez’s role in local schools has been key to her success as a Street Team member. She canvasses parents waiting to pick up their children, easily engaging them to spread the word about Watts Rising programs. And her job with LAUSD perfectly positions her to plan Cool Schools tree planting events as part of Watts Rising’s Urban Greening initiative.

Cortez’s work has benefited countless members of her community. She regularly drives families to MudTown Farms to pick up free produce and has helped residents save hundreds of dollars through the free solar program. And the students who help plant trees for the Cool Schools program not only learn about trees but also create a legacy of shadier, more heat-protected playgrounds for future students.

**“I envision each child growing up and telling their own child, ‘I planted that tree.’ They’ll always have memories of what they did in their community.”**

MARY ANN CORTEZ

Beyond the benefits to her fellow Watts residents, Cortez has gained invaluable skills and experience, becoming a stronger leader and communicator. She has become more comfortable with connecting with people over Zoom and WhatsApp, and managing events — sometimes two in one day — and these experiences have strengthened her organization and

multitasking abilities. Street Team members also regularly present at Watts Rising public forums, an opportunity that Cortez credits with helping her to develop her skills as a public speaker. “I present on what I did each month, answer questions and take feedback. These are important skills that I’ve developed as a Street Team member.” And to add to the skills and capacity she has built, Cortez has greatly increased her income through working on the Street Team and other Watts Rising projects. Cortez is

determined to see her Watts Rising projects through. After the success of the first tree planting event for the Cool Schools project, there are three more schools to go — and then the trees will need to be watered and maintained.

**“It’s a blessing, being a part of the Street Team. I get to work in my community, deal with projects, and I also get paid. I’m just excited to be a part of it.”**

MARY ANN CORTEZ

**ANAI VELAZQUEZ** and her two siblings grew up in the same Watts home where she and her parents still live. Velazquez has been an integral part of her church community throughout her life, including attending St. Lawrence, a private school in the Watts Rising project area. After years of seeing her peers participate in the local public school community, Velazquez saw the Watts Rising’s Street Team as a way not only to deepen her participation in the church but also to expand her involvement in other aspects of the local community.

**“I’ve become less afraid to talk with people outside my own circle. I’ve found that if I’m kind, they’ll be kind back. Being a Street Team member made me way more comfortable with talking to people.”**

ANAI VELAZQUEZ

Velazquez was nervous to start the Street Team outreach work — she was shy, and talking to other local residents wasn’t initially a comfortable task. But as she continues her second year as a Street Team member, she notices that she has become much more comfortable with the work. She and other team members table around the neighborhood and at local events, helping their neighbors to learn about the different programs and opportunities Watts Rising offers.

Through her work, Velazquez has helped many different members of her community. By sharing information and connecting community members to Watts Rising programs, she ensured that the priests at her church could replace a leaking refrigerator, helped the deacon get free rooftop solar panels, and connected a grieving widower with gardening support through MudTown Farms. Armed with information that helps fellow Watts residents, she has become more confident and connected in the community.

In addition to becoming more confident and skilled at community outreach and networking, Velazquez has



Anai Velazquez at Corazon de Watts event. Photo credit: HACLA

**“I like leading and organizing people and events. It was my idea to table at St. Lawrence’s carnival — we got a lot of leads in those three days.”**

ANAI VELAZQUEZ

benefited from the Street Team program financially. She has earned enough to pay off her car loan five months early, with enough left over to fund family celebrations for her birthday and other occasions.

Now, looking forward, Velazquez is ready to take the confidence and skills she has gained with the Street Team into a new role: teaching a class at the career technical education program where she works as a receptionist for her day job. Once she receives the required credentials, she hopes to teach an entrepreneurship course, building on her experience running a home decorating business on the side.

**“After a year as a Street Team member, I feel more confident to take on responsibility and connect people from different organizations. I feel like I can handle tasks when people ask if I can do it.”**

ANAI VELAZQUEZ