

# Veteran activist leads displacement avoidance, helping residents stay in Watts



## BACKGROUND

This case study highlights how the Watts Rising Displacement Avoidance Plan (DAP) connects community leaders like Arturo Ybarra with Watts residents, like Marlene Cisneros, to protect local homeownership enabling and empowering community members to stay in Watts and thrive. To learn more about the DAP, see [page 49](#).

*Interviews for this story were conducted in April and October of 2023.*

**Arturo Ybarra, founder and executive director of Watts Century Latino Organization at a housing clinic workshop on 3/12/2022.** Photo credit: Los Angeles Mayor's Office of Economic Opportunity

**ARTURO YBARRA** began his career as an activist and organizer as a teen in Mexico. In 1968, he survived the Tlatelolco massacre in Mexico City and was arrested and tortured for his participation in the Mexican Student Movement. In 1969, after he was arrested again, Ybarra's sister invited him to stay with her in Moorpark, so he made the journey to Southern California. He soon jumped into union and tenant organizing in South Los Angeles.

Years later, Ybarra and his wife, Albeza, moved to Watts and in 1990, founded the Watts/Century Latino Organization (W/CLO). "We created this organization with the vision of creating bridges of communication and unity between Latinos and African Americans," Ybarra said. The W/CLO has operated for over 30 years, providing services, such as homeownership workshops, as well as celebrating cultural events, like the organization's flagship annual Multicultural Cinco de Mayo Festival. Ybarra's organization embodies a spirit of multiculturalism: "My grandfather was a descendant from African slaves. My grandmother was a descendant from Europeans... My blood is multicultural."

The W/CLO was a natural partner to help guide and implement the Watts Rising DAP — a core requirement of the TCC

grant. Decades before TCC was created, Ybarra and the W/CLO provided essential anti-displacement services to the Watts community. Ybarra described how, through workshops, educational programs, and mentorship, his organization has helped many Watts residents save their homes from foreclosure. His daughter, Pahola, served as Program Manager and was instrumental in these efforts as well.

**"[We invite] Latinos and African Americans and the poor population [to learn] what they need in order to qualify to buy their first house [and] manage their debts."**

ARTURO YBARRA

Motivated by TCC grant requirements and led by W/CLO and Mayor Karen Bass's office, the DAP provides formal avenues to connect community-based organizations with local government leaders within the City of LA and beyond. For example, Ybarra described a burgeoning relationship his organization is building with LA County Supervisor Holly Mitchell. He hopes that it will "make it easier for the government agencies and elected officials... to assist this region that has been without voice nor representation for decades."

W/CLO and Ybarra's leadership became ever more critical to the community when pandemic-era eviction moratoria were lifted, creating an influx of people threatened by displacement. "The local Latino population [is not] much aware of how the system works... And on the part of the elected officials, they don't know how to work with the Latino community... there's a lack of a real campaign to involve people that might be expelled." The Watts Rising DAP is designed to help address this cultural and informational disconnect between decision makers and the community.

Arturo Ybarra — renowned for his leadership, activism, and dedication to uniting the people of Watts and South LA to support their community — passed away in July 2023. His tremendous impact on his community, the role he played as an activist and leader, and his legacy of unity and multicultural connection is recognized by many, as documented by Andrew Campa's article in the Los Angeles Times, entitled "Watts' Arturo Ybarra, the 'epitome of what a community activist should be,' dies." The Ybarra's daughter, Autumn, has recently stepped in to join her mother Albeza to lead the organization.

**"We helped hundreds of homeowners to save their house... For those people that wanted to somehow thank us for the work we have done, they brought us some food from El Pollo Loco, and lunches like that, that was our way of being paid, it was beautiful."**

ARTURO YBARRA

**MARLENE CISNEROS** lives with her husband and children in Watts, which she has called home for over 15 years. After starting out by renting a home, she was able to purchase her house in 2009 after the housing market crashed, lowering prices. When she was inquiring about lowering her interest rates, Cisneros immediately turned to Arturo Ybarra and the W/CLO.

"Mr. Ybarra at the W/CLO helped me step by step on how to handle this. He did that for everyone that came to him. He helped everyone individually and without hesitation. He was able to even help me lower my interest rate from 5% to 3%. With the money I have saved, I am able to spend that money on my daughter's education [at a private school]. I am immensely grateful for his help. There is no one else like him in this community. He was like a therapist and attentive to everyone."

Cisneros learned of the W/CLO from Amada Valle, a member of Watts Rising's Community Advisory Group, residents who contribute to Watts Rising's governance and advise leadership on projects and plans. Valle approached Cisneros during an event in a local park and encouraged her to attend her first W/CLO workshop over a decade ago. Since then, Cisneros has participated in countless W/CLO events, including the organization's annual backpack giveaway and food distribution event. Most recently, she attended a workshop hosted by W/CLO and Mayor Bass's Office to help her and other residents understand how to lower their utility bills.

Cisneros often shares her appreciation of these events with her friends and family. "I ran into a friend the other day and told her the unfortunate news of Mr. Ybarra's passing. She said she stopped by W/CLO a few weeks prior and they helped her purchase her first home. It speaks to the great work Mr. Ybarra did, even in his last few months." Ybarra and W/CLO have had a tremendous impact on Cisneros's life, not only enabling her to keep her home, but also helping her to stay in her community of Watts.

**"This neighborhood is where I feel most comfortable. I was thinking of moving, but Mr. Ybarra told me not to because the city and others were fixing up the streets, and more businesses and amenities would be coming. I trust him so much that I listened to that advice."**

MARLENE CISNEROS



**Marlene Cisneros, a Watts resident and W/CLO participant.**

Photo credit: UCLA Luskin Center for Innovation