

Stories from the **Community**



This case study is part of a series of stories from residents, business owners, workers, and others who have shaped — or been shaped by — the implementation of the California Transformative Climate Communities grant program (TCC). To learn more about TCC, visit: <https://innovation.luskin.ucla.edu/tcc/>.

Documenting these stories is part of UCLA Luskin Center for Innovation's evaluation of groundbreaking progress in seven TCC communities: Fresno, Ontario, Pomona, Stockton, and the Los Angeles neighborhoods of Northeast San Fernando Valley, South Los Angeles, and Watts.

Rooted in community: Transforming South LA, one tree at a time

This case study documents how TCC's investment in urban forestry can give residents knowledge and skills to become stewards of a greener South LA. Both residents share about the impactful physical and mental health benefits of living in a greener community. We learn about Erika Yates, who is a recipient of a parkway tree planted in front of her home, and Tasha Gibbons, who is an active volunteer with TreePeople.



Erika Yates standing with the tree planted in the parkway in front of her home. Credit: Alex Aguirre Levitas

ERIKA YATES works as a library resource specialist at El Camino Community College and has called South LA home all of her life. Her mom was widowed when Yates was young. Raising Yates and her siblings in a small apartment proved to be a struggle, and she sought a home with room to raise her three children and have natural features. Her mom saw potential in a property in South LA that she bought in 1981, and the Yates family has lived in that house ever since. Her mom was drawn to the house in part because of the trees on the property that created natural shade and kept their home cool in the summer.

Over the years, however, Yates has seen several of the original trees on her property damaged by storms and infections, while her entire block lacks mature and

“Now there are trees on both sides of the street, including the one in front of my house... It's improved the look, which of course, once you improve the look of the area, you're improving the property value, so that's an immediate benefit for me as a property owner.

— ERIKA YATES



TreePeople staff training volunteers to plant trees in public parkways in South LA. Credit: TreePeople

“I figure that my nieces or my great-nieces and nephews will probably really be the ones to reap the benefits of [the trees].

– ERIKA YATES

healthy trees. She says this impacts the look and feel of her street and how much time she spends walking in her neighborhood. Her neighborhood doesn't always feel welcoming to pedestrians, despite being a great place to grow up, with long-time residents who care about their homes. This compares to the feeling she gets when walking around her workplace of El Camino College, with its mature tree canopy, which she saw creates a welcoming and calming atmosphere.

The South LA Eco-Lab is supporting residents to change the narrative of their neighborhood, one tree at a time. Yates was excited to benefit from TCC-funded trees planted in front of her home and on her street that will provide more shade as they grow, along with supporting the mental health benefits of a peaceful and beautiful environment.

Yates recognizes that trees are an investment with benefits that compound over time. In addition to the potential of increasing property values for homeowners, trees can prepare a community to adapt to environmental challenges. For example, by providing natural shade, the trees can help residents withstand increasing temperatures without increasing energy

costs. Over time, trees can also help improve air quality in areas with a lot of particulate pollution. Yates knows the return on this investment will be for future generations that continue her family's legacy in their South LA neighborhood.

Yates is encouraged by the potential of the TCC grant to improve the neighborhood through the Community Canopy Expansion project. She sees the value in both individual and collective community solutions to a healthier and greener community. The coordinated and concentrated investment motivates Yates to contribute to the movement to make her neighborhood more beautiful and work towards a vision for a greener South LA.

“It motivates me to keep doing what I'm already doing at my house. Last year, I started my own garden in the back, planning different vegetables and whatnot, and it's encouraged me to keep it up.

– ERIKA YATES

“It gives me the opportunity to get grounded and take a moment to gain mental clarity while we are planting a tree. Tree planting has truly helped my mental health over the last two years.

– TASHA GIBBONS

TASHA GIBBONS has lived in South LA since 2020, when she decided to move closer to school and work. Having previously lived in surrounding areas, her current South Central apartment feels the most like home. Gibbons studies and advocates for awareness of environmental racism and sustainable practices at Cal State Dominguez Hills and volunteers for organizations like TreePeople, Walk Good LA, and We Grow LA. The TCC South LA Eco Lab has created a venue to promote her passion for helping people understand environment-physical-mental health connections and the importance of civic engagement in marginalized communities like South Central.

The TCC volunteer work that Gibbons engages in allows her to stay connected with her community through health and civic engagement. She feels it is her duty to give back. In her own words, “because if you take care of home, home will take care of you.” She wants to be a model for how others can get involved in bettering their environment.

Specifically, Gibbons has seen how trees have brought her community together. Through her participation in volunteer tree planting and maintenance, she has been able to make her neighbors aware of the cascading benefits of having trees in their community. Recently, she has helped TCC plant and distribute several trees in the Harvard Park area, including fruit trees. Gibbons is motivated by the impact she feels when in the Harvard Park area of her community and shares this experience along with the potential benefits that trees can deliver –educating fellow residents on how fruit trees can provide shade, give residents the confidence to grow their own nourishing food, and reduce grocery costs in an area that lacks access to healthy food. Aside from the ways trees benefit her community, Gibbons shared how the act of planting trees has improved her well-being.

“You hear tree planting, and you think, ‘Oh, that’s off by the beach, or that’s in the burbs.’ No, it’s in LA. We’re trying to fix the city. We are trying to beautify the hood one tree at a time... It’s just really nice to see organizations like Tree People and [the broader] Eco Lab being so close to home.

– TASHA GIBBONS



Tasha Gibbons at a TreePeople volunteer tree planting event near Harvard Park in South LA. Credit: Tasha Gibbons

“The other day, one of my friends and I were talking about [how] there’s so many empty plots around the city.... At the Root Down Garden, you would never think, walking past that, that there was a whole garden in there... I want to do something like that.

– TASHA GIBBONS

Recently, the volunteers planted a tree near a house with an existing tree canopy. There was a breeze and shade they had not experienced half a block over. The homeowner confirmed all the benefits Gibbons promotes to residents. Experiences like this reaffirm why Gibbons makes an effort to post to social media. She hopes to spread awareness of the benefits to the community but also the opportunities for residents to make positive changes in their environment. Gibbons is trying to get her neighbors involved one block at a time and one tree at a time.

Gibbons has a radical vision for her community. She wants her South LA block to look like a lush nursery or the Amazon rainforest, where every couple of steps you would see a tree. She doesn’t plan to stop at trees. She wants to see the ground being utilized to the fullest extent with raised garden beds and other plants to promote better air quality, lower temperatures, and better individual and community physical and mental health. Gibbons’ five to ten-year goals include completing her studies, advocating for better environmental policies, and starting an urban farm with friends. She takes her inspiration from a local urban farm in the South LA area and has already identified a potential location for another farm.