

# OUR CITY, OUR PLANET



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**M. Fernandes**

Most of us go about our daily lives, see what's happening in the news regarding climate change and the environment, and think to ourselves—what can I do about it? It's so easy to throw our hands up in the air in frustration, not knowing where to begin or how to make a difference. Some of us are forced into survival mode because we have to think about food and shelter, so we don't have the space and time to think beyond our circumstances. When it comes to what's happening in our own backyard, we have no idea how to stand up for ourselves in the decision-making process on a local level.



Martha, Participant in Nuestra Casa's Environmental justice Program

Now, imagine being undocumented. Imagine the terror of facing uncertainty while working and trying to feed your family, too afraid to rock the boat. Forget about calling attention to the brownish-orange sludge coming out of your faucet. Complaining about the pollutants in the air, making it hard for your asthmatic son to breathe, is out of the question.

Traditionally marginalized communities feel the effects of pollution and climate change disproportionately. Sadly, the communities who've experienced the



Pre-Covid Meetings

worst effects of climate change have historically been left out of the conversation when policy is made. It's not that people in these communities don't care what's going on—it's quite the contrary. The truth is that they don't know that they can have a say in these matters. Nuestra Casa has fought hard to bridge the gap between community and policymakers--even helping to bring about an amendment in the San Francisco Bay Plan that requires the inclusion of all stakeholders being affected by the effects of climate change to be involved (read more here).

One of the vital programs that Nuestra Casa has developed is Environmental Justice. Through this program, community members come together with a facilitator who guides them through topics such as

- water conservation
- climate change
- water, land and air pollution.

They are also given a historic overview of where environmental justice and racism intersect—affecting historically Black & low-income communities, which in turn impacts public health.

We sat down to chat with Martha, a participant from the community of East Palo Alto, about her experience in the program. The video series, in Spanish, is available here. Here is a summary of her responses in English:



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**NC - Why is it important for the community to get involved in this program?**

**Martha** - To me, it's really important for members of the community as well as the representatives from their respective cities because this way, we can keep our cities a little cleaner, a little better-kept. I really liked the idea that city officials got together with us to talk about ways that we could talk about maintaining our city—"en la unión hace la fuerza"—together, we are stronger; "el querer estar el poder" -where there's a will there's a way. It's really important to get involved because it's the only thing we are going to leave to our children, to our grandchildren... So I'm grateful that all of you are guiding us and teaching us the ways in which we can maintain our environment and safeguard against climate change...because I know that we are responsible in some way for all of these climatic changes. So in this aspect, I wanted to be a little more involved, and I hope to be able to help [the situation] a little more.

**NC - What are some of the things you learned in the EJ program?**

**Martha** - One of the most important things we learned is to conserve water because in the future, it will be scarce and impossible to remediate. We also learned about separating our trash. Before, I used to wash dishes with the water running. Now I put all the soapy dishes together and rinse them all off at once. For me, I feel that it's something fundamental because of its scarcity in the future. I've talked to my children and my grandchildren to do the same. The same for the time spent in the bathroom, I've discussed not spending as much time in the shower--even to turn off the water while lathering up.

**NC - How did your lifestyle change after being presented with the facts in the course of the program?**

**Martha** - I personally learned many things about climate change. I learned about recycling, waterworks, the changes that we may have here in East Palo Alto, what can come in the future...flooding. We learned a bit about everything. I'm very grateful for all the courses that you have provided. I'm very grateful for all of you.