



## Through Our Eyes: Activists Today

Interview by Christine Joy Ferrer

18

In the summer of 2003 *RP&E* published *Where Do We Go From Here? A Look at the Long Road to Environmental Justice*. The young activists of 2003 voiced their aspirations for the EJ movement in "The Next Generation, Youth Voices in Environmental Justice." Today, the young and the fearless continue to build the movement. In the following article, Christine Joy Ferrer, 24, talks with her fellow activists (via email and in person). She also caught up with two of the 2003 interviewees to see where their lives have led them seven years later. Their original comments and a glimpse of their personal journeys since can be found on the following pages. The wide range of interests and the powerful involvement of youth is a vital indicator that movements for justice are on the rise. We'll check back in 2020 to see just where this resurgence leads. You can listen to a recorded version of the live interviews at [www.urbanhabitat.org/audio](http://www.urbanhabitat.org/audio).

### Youth Roundtable Participants

- **Ellen Choy**, 25, Youth Engagement Coordinator for the Environmental Service Learning Initiative; co-director, Youth Advisory Board.
- **Kari Fulton**, 24, Co-founder of Checktheweather.net; National Youth Campaign Coordinator, Environmental Justice and Climate Change Initiative.
- **Gier Hernandez**, 17, Youth Advisory Board, Environmental Service Learning Initiative.
- **Beatriz Herrera**, 27, Community Organizer, Women Workers Project at POWER (People Organized to Win Employment Rights) in San Francisco, California.
- **De'Anthony Jones**, 18, Youth Advisory Board, Environmental Service Learning Initiative; San Francisco Youth Commission, representing the Fillmore and Western Addition neighborhoods.
- **Leah LaCroix**, 18, District 11 Commissioner and Mayoral Appointee of the San Francisco Youth Commission, Psychology student at San Francisco State University.
- **Annie Loya**, 24, Executive Director, Youth United for Community Action, East Palo Alto, California.
- **Julia Rhee**, 25, Former National Youth Organizer, Green for All, first generation movement builder.

Photo:

(Clockwise from top left) Choy, Fulton, Hernandez, Herrera, Rhee, LaCroix, Loya, and Jones.



**Christine Joy Ferrer:** How have you, your friends and family struggled with issues of transportation, housing, environmental health, jobs, and climate change?

### Environmental Health

**Choy:** My family was living in a really low income community in Hawthorne, California. When I was eight, we moved into a majority white middle class neighborhood near the beach in Torrance. The difference in environment had a really huge impact—I could immediately tell the air was noticeably easier to breathe, our street was a lot quieter, neighbors were quieter. We had more than just one grocery store. Our grocery store in Hawthorne was raided during the LA riots. Not seeing any of that violence or injustice, immediately after moving not even 20 minutes away from Hawthorne, was really powerful. It changed how I perceived my environment and how I saw the people around me and related to them. On top of that, I still had family members we had left behind in Hawthorne and Chinatown. As a young child, feeling luckier than the rest of your family is a really strange thing—the access you have to education and things like that. That’s when I first felt those struggles.

### Transportation and Housing

**Jones:** I have a single mom who waited 18 years on the Section 8 housing list [it has over 3,000 people] to move out of public housing. I’ve lived in San Francisco’s Potrero Hill neighborhood, in the Western Addition and in the Westside Courts public housing complex. I saw the struggles in these communities and how they relate to the environment—socially and physically—from the disconnect within neighborhoods to the old and deteriorating housing. Places like the Hunter’s Point neighborhood with its asbestos and lead. In the Westside, we had mold and mildew on the walls. Even in our new house—we have a Section 8 subsidized duplex that we share—in a Sunnyvale neighborhood, we had to deal with dirty housing. It seems like if you’re low income, there’s no place for you in society, and that shouldn’t be. It should be about getting you to a point where you can make money.

My mom didn’t have a car, so I grew up—most of my life—using MUNI. It was tough seeing her take me places on the bus and get home late. I’ve lived through those fare increases—it was 34¢, then it went up to 50¢, and then to 75¢. My mom just recently got a new car. Now I’m thankful to have had both experiences—driving and taking public trans-

Photo:

**Then:** Kids First and Transportation Justice Working Group demonstrate at May 2005 AC Transit meeting.

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portation. I think, if I would have grown up with a car, I would have looked down on the public transportation system, like, “That’s for poor people.”

**Ferrer: Why are these issues—transportation, housing, environmental health, jobs, and climate change—important to you as young leaders?**

**Choy:** Young people not only are going to live with the consequences of the actions of past generations, we’re going to be leading the fight. It’s also important to note that we don’t have to wait to become professionals to start being leaders, we can start right now. We’re able to influence policy, to organize community networks, run our own events, and be peer educators.

So, it’s super critical to encourage and support that leadership, especially from youth of color and from low income communities, and to help provide them with resources. There’s other young people’s organizations in the Bay Area—Grind for the Green, Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice—that are doing the same work that we are: developing young leaders to be empowered to go and talk to their friends and family and spread the message that way.

**Environmental Justice**

**Rhee:** Environmental justice is important because it’s the critical nexus where issues affecting communities of color and marginalized folks intersect with the needs of the planet. What’s good for communities of color is often good for the environment and the economy. Green jobs especially present a solution to the dual crises. When people are able to live with self determination, have access to locally grown food, travel less to get to work, reduce their carbon footprint by saving energy through retrofits—then justice will follow.

I believe everyone on this planet is intrinsically connected. As Americans, we can see our energy bills go up as we continue to rely on outsourced dirty fossil fuels. There has to be a point where we accept that all our waste ends up in someone else’s home and backyard. We don’t have to look much further than at what mountaintop removal is doing to the water and air supply of working class communities in the U.S., or how coal extraction is polluting sacred indigenous lands all around.

**Hernandez:** I see the climate issue as a struggle for survival and not just about hugging trees. If we look at our

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## Invest in Youth

By Roberto D. Nutlouis



There needs to be more investment in the youth, especially Native youth. Youth in Indian Country have to deal with the past racist Federal Indian policies and cultural eradication, which has manifested in social ills that plague our Indigenous communities. Currently, Indigenous youth have to deal with many issues that range from identity crisis, drug and alcohol abuse, cultural loss, suicide, depression, and hopelessness. This calls for more support and encouragement of Native youth who are involved with environmental justice work. Native youth are also some of the most

marginalized people within the mainstream and Native society. This needs to be acknowledged and addressed.

We need to empower our youth and offer them a new way of thinking, knowing and understanding based on the cultural values of our peoples. This does not necessarily mean going back to pre-contact times but learning about the past. By understanding history, we may find the solution to save our people from the current situation that they are in. This calls for innovative ideas and solutions—not solutions from the government or outsiders but from the peo-

ple themselves. Creativity needs to be encouraged.

The local youth leaders also need to be identified. Give them proper training with tools and funds necessary to carry out the work. There also needs to be a network, or coalition-building in place so native youth from all over the globe can keep each other empowered because power lies in unity. ■

*In 2003, Roberto Nutlouis was 23 years old, and a member of the Indigenous Youth Coalition of Pinon and Black Mesa Water Coalition.*



## Sustain Our Lands

By Roberto D. Nutlouis



I got involved with the environmental justice movement when I learned that our precious water was being depleted and damaged by a coal mining company, Peabody Coal Company. Peabody had tapped into our communities' sole source of drinking water to transport coal. We developed our own youth-led organization "Black Mesa Water Coalition," and began organizing to raise the awareness on this issue and get our tribal government to demand that Peabody stop the industrial use of our water.

The response from the tribal political leaders was that the operation is needed to generate revenues for the tribal government and provide jobs. They challenged us on how we would replace the revenues and jobs from this economic trap. We

began to seriously look into ways to rebuild our communities, guided by the prayers of our ancestors and based on the cultural values taught to us by our elders. We developed projects around Food Security and Natural Earth Building.

These projects were designed to create a space where local youth can learn about local skills. This is vital in developing and strengthening sustainable communities. I connected with Indigenous Community Enterprises, which works to provide energy-efficient, culturally appropriate and affordable housing to Navajo families. I am still involved and volunteer with Black Mesa Water Coalition in the Environmental Justice, Green Job Initiative, and Climate Justice work.

I am also part of Native Movement and

volunteer as a project director during the summer to implement "Sustainable Living: Reclaiming our Traditional Knowledge" back in Pinon. We are advocating for energy-efficient homes for our people in hopes that our tribe can fully support building with R values of 30 and above. As for farming, we are working with local youth to design and experiment with various rain water catchment systems to capture what precipitation we are blessed with and maximize its use through developing the fields utilizing 'permaculture' principles. We hope to share this knowledge with other communities later on. ■

*Roberto D. Nutlouis, now 30, is project manager at Indigenous Community Enterprises, Flagstaff, Arizona.*

health issues, climate is really affecting how we are living. We are ruining our environment and it's ruining us.

### Ferrer: What are some of the projects you are working on or have worked on in the past?

**Herrera:** At POWER, we fight for the rights of domestic workers. Many experience the hazards of working with harsh chemicals every day. They develop asthma, skin rashes, allergies, and other ailments from using cleaners, such as bleach and ammonia. Within the Statewide Domestic Worker Coalition, we are currently working on a resolution that we hope will be a first step towards improving the living and working conditions of domestic workers.

We organize African Americans in Bay View Hunters Point against displacement. Many people in that community are living with asthma, nosebleeds, and cancer from being near a toxic shipyard. The Lennar Corporation is looking to build luxury condos over this toxic land, which would further endanger the health of the community.

We are also fighting a campaign by the San Francis-

co MTA and the police department to use racial profiling to stop people, tow their vehicles, and check for tickets on buses—with the potential threat of being arrested or even deported.

**Rhee:** I'm on the Black Eyed Peas concert tour as the Green For All tour ambassador helping to mobilize volunteers at each of the 23 tour stops to build awareness of the possibilities within a green economy. It's our chance to invite more young people across the country to join the movement for change and a sustainable future.

Other projects I've been involved with are Green For All's national Day of Action campaign that garnered over 50,000 petitions to push for two equity provisions that would increase green job training access and targeted hire-for-job opportunities in the house version of the ACES climate bill.

**Jones:** At Mission High School, we had Eco Week where we brought in teachers and their students to teach them about environmental justice. There's also Dance with the Youth at Mission, which is aimed at making us aware of how we've lost our respect for

Photo:  
Roberto Nutlouis  
Courtesy of author

mother nature and women in general. It's an event to remind people that we have an obligation to respect women and mother nature as well.

As far as housing is concerned, the Youth Commission has been working with SF Hope to get youth input on their project to rebuild some of the housing authority's oldest properties—Westside, Potrero Hill, and Hunter's Point. The project is going to hold a Leadership Academy in the summer at University of California Berkeley and will engage youth to work at their sites.

**LaCroix:** The SF Youth Commission is urging the MTA to not increase the discount fast pass and to create a Life Line fast pass for youth who qualify for free and reduced cost lunch. We want them to keep the fast passes at \$20 per month [a \$10 increase is scheduled for May 2010] for the fiscal year 2010-11.

**Ferrer: What do you think are some of the biggest challenges that young people are faced with today?**

**Herrera:** Financial and environmental security. We're living in the midst of an economic crisis, which has resulted in budget cuts to schools, community organizations, and service organizations that support working class communities of color. We've also expe-

rienced—in the last few years—a growing list of natural disasters that, I imagine, are only going to increase in size and frequency in the decades to come. Youth are inheriting this climate and will have to work hard to fight the effects of global warming.

**Jones:** The government cannot keep laying its budget problems on its youth. We are the future. Look at youth as a social corporation. The more stocks you buy in this corporation, the better the corporation, but that's not happening. They keep treating youth as a 99-cent product and as a result, they have 99-cent features. We can't just accept a job at McDonalds.

**Loya:** More and more young people are being criminalized and tracked into the prison industrial system. More and more are left feeling hopeless because they can't find funding to continue post-secondary education. Some can't even find support to get through secondary institutions. We cannot expect this problem to fix itself or expect young people to lead the country when it is their time. We must believe in youth. Our disbelief is the problem.

**Ferrer: How do you see race/class/gender/age affecting the way you do this work?**

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## Mutal Listening, Mutual Respect

By Chi Mei Tam



If youth and adults are going to work together, there should be mutual respect. Adults believe they know what's best. But us youth also know what's good for us. So we should have a say in how things work. There should be mutual listening. That's the starting point: listening to each other. I've done trainings on adultism, training youth and adults to listen to each other. I've helped youth to understand that they do have a voice. I've also tried to open their minds by

saying, "You have ideas; express them." It's important to get youth to become more confident talking to adults and working with adults. I also teach adults about youth ideas and that they should listen to them.

Once listening happens, we need to talk about how to work on improving our society and our community. We can go deeper into the issues involving the community, our society—what's happening in the world, the

war—and how to improve them. At that point, we would have more of a dialogue going. We need workshops to educate youth, just to get them to understand the issues. Once they know the issues, we can train them and build confidence and leadership skills. Then we can teach them how to take action. ■

*In 2003, Chi Mei Tam was 18 years old and a former co-leader at Asian Immigrant Women's Advocates (AIWA).*



## Looking Back

By Chi Mei Tam

**Fulton:** I came into this work because I saw a desperate need to address these issues in my community. I grow in this work because I notice the amount of women who are leading these efforts for a just and real transition to clean, healthy green technology. I know that I am privileged to be in this space talking about these issues but I also know that I come from these issues and live them. It is a constant quest of mine never to forget why I am doing this work. I know that the people I work with, and I, represent fresh voices and ideas on these issues. Sometimes people are not ready to listen to what we have to say when we keep it 100 percent real, but that is the only way we are going to get to real solutions. As an African American young woman I cannot forget that I represent those who will be most impacted by climate change. I cannot ignore that fact any more than I can ignore my hue.

**LaCroix:** Working as I do with the Youth Commission, I often hear people say: "It's great to see such young kids working together!" But their tone suggests that we're toddlers playing with rocks and sticks, pretending to be on some mission that's world changing. You can really tell when people aren't listening to you. I haven't personally experienced gender inequality but I'm sure it will come up. As far as race and class, they do have a big impact on how people are perceived and sometimes judged, especially a young person of color that's of low-income or working class, doing outreach or community organizing work. However, although it affects how people perceive my work, it doesn't affect how I actually do my work.

**Choy:** We have to start from a place of realizing that our country was built on racist principles and policies. Though we've had a lot of victories along the way and made some progress, we're still fighting a lot of those injustices at the political level. Yes, we have a black president, but we're living in a system of capitalism and consumption that is destroying communities of color first. If we address the problems facing the most impacted communities, we will address the root causes of what has actually brought about the climate crisis and all of the other environmental injustices that we've had to deal with. That's the importance of using communities of color to lead the fight. We haven't seen that in the traditional environ-

mental movement, which was white-led and very privileged. What we're seeing now is a really hard effort from a lot of communities to change that framework.

My family was considered to be low-income, but they always had the means to survive. We always had a home, transportation, and enough money to live comfortably. I was involved with an organization called Asian Immigrant Women's Advocates (AIWA) when I was in high school. They did a campaign on improving ergonomic conditions for garment workers. My mother was one of those workers involved with AIWA for quite some time. I joined up with them when they started their youth group back in 2000. I was mostly just a passive participant. My involvement was

minimal. Although I'm no longer involved in activism work, I hope that our government, our communities, and the business world understand the importance of a healthy and sustainable environment. We cannot take it for granted, but looking from our current political, cultural, societal, and economic situation, I can't help but see that environmental issues are being put on the back burner for the sake of profit, greed, and even self-preservation. ■

*Chi Mei Tam, now 25, is finance and operations manager for McCullum Youth Court in Oakland, California.*

*Youth Voices 2010*

**Jones:** Race, class, gender, and age have all been socially motivated. It's all man-made. We have to understand that we're more alike than we are separate. Struggles that low-income African Americans are going through are the struggles of low-income Asian Americans, or low-income Latino Americans, or even low-income white Americans. Our struggle should be the very thing that bands us together, not our income, not our nationality, not our race.

As Ellen had mentioned before, this is what our nation was built upon. Abraham Lincoln fought for the Emancipation Proclamation but it only freed some slaves. It's funny how we've been played against each other. The Fillmore, for example, was primarily an African American district until gentrification came through. But during World War II, the houses of Japanese Americans sent to internment camps were given to blacks at a subsidized price. Now, they turn around and take them away from the African Americans with the urban renewal program.

Even now, we have youth who are willing to kill each other over a street name in the Fillmore. But



## Annie Loya: My Story



My family is from a small rural town, Pearl Lagoon, in Nicaragua. At the time of our departure from Nicaragua, the country was in deep conflict—fighting the Reagan-backed Contra and Sandinista war. At the root of this war was a country trying to win social equity and maintain its natural wealth vs. the predator who wanted to gain control for its own economic ambitions. All the while, American media spun it as the United States trying to save yet another democratically challenged region.

We moved to East Palo Alto, California. A town that came into being by the driving force of its residents. There was no other city at the time that truly accepted people of color, so they created their own. It was a small start but a grand effort and message of self-determination. East Palo Alto inherited many burdens: a chemical waste plant, a county dump, land that sits on top of a water bed, and power lines over the city that emit electromagnetic waves. East Palo Alto looks very different from the neighboring city of Palo Alto. Palo

Alto bears large green trees, smoothly paved streets, many parks and open spaces, grocery stores, and recreational spaces.

I was 12 when I got my first job. Myself, a couple of my cousins, and other neighborhood kids sold candy—50 cents for every \$5 candy bar sold and \$1 for every \$6 candy bar sold. The remaining money went to this white guy. We knocked on doors for hours at a time. No break, no water, no nothing.

My older cousins knew it was wrong and would plot ways to get away with this candy and the money we made, to send a big ‘screw you’ message to this man. But we never had the nerve to carry it out. Needless to say, I didn’t stay on long.

A few months later, my cousin Lourdes became involved with Youth United for Community Action (YUCA). She was more aware of inequities and felt the purpose to address them. She would use our previous employer as an example and make statements like, “I bet he wouldn’t go into the white neighborhoods

and recruit them white kids to go on those long-ass trips and barely make \$15 a day.”

She soon recruited my older cousin Travis. At the time, a classmate of his had recently died by climbing a power line located in the nearby Baylands. He touched a wire, was electrocuted, and fell to his death. There was no barrier around this structure that resembled a jungle gym to prevent children—or anyone unauthorized—from becoming familiar with it. No signs, no spikes, no accountability. PG&E placed the blame on the property owners and the property owners placed the blame on PG&E. Our community refused to let this young boy’s death be in vain. YUCA called a press conference and Travis asked me to write a speech. It was my first speech at 13 years old. You know wrong when you hear it. I have continued with the organization ever since. ■

*Annie Loya, 24, is executive director of Youth United for Community Action (YUCA) in East Palo Alto, California.*

they’re fighting over a street named after a person who signed the Fugitive Slave Act. If you were a slave and wanted to be free, you escaped to a free state, but people in that free state had to report you or they would be committing a crime. We have to understand what we’re fighting for.

Photo:

Annie Loya and Youth United for Community Action members celebrate shutting down a waste handling company in East Palo Alto.

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**Ferrer: This year is the 20th anniversary of the founding of RP&E and it’s also the 40th anniversary of Earth Day. In 20 years, what kind of state do you think the environment will be in? Or what do you hope it will be?**

**Choy:** Climate intersects all sorts of issues that our community is faced with—racism, lack of health care,

our faulty education system. All the injustices grow with climate change, especially for young people, so it’s really important to pay attention.

Hopefully, change starts from communities reclaiming power over their own resources, leading the way to becoming self-sufficient, growing local food, buying and consuming everything locally, even having more of a voice in local politics and therefore, international politics. In general, living much more harmoniously with our natural world and in essence, going back to what our cultural histories have shown us from the beginning. If we can do that, hopefully, our world will look a lot better and our environment will be a lot more sustainable. ■

*Christine Joy Ferrer is the publishing assistant for RP&E. Thanks to the National Radio Project for recording assistance.*