

New Voices Are Rising 2010 Summer Advocacy Institute

A Project of the Rose Foundation for Communities and the Environment



New Voices' Summer Institute Class of 2010

The 2010 *New Voices Are Rising* Summer Institute's 5 week intensive program worked with an inspiring group of sixteen young environmental leaders from Oakland and Richmond, California, to develop and present recommendations on climate and air quality, and to set the stage for their continued environmental stewardship and advocacy into the future.

Summer Environmental Justice Advocacy Institute

This summer, the Rose Foundation's *New Voices Are Rising* project conducted its fifth summer civic engagement and advocacy-training Institute. This year's Institute engaged students by exploring the environmental justice issues related to air pollution and climate change.

Sixteen students – fifteen from Oakland, California high schools and one newly minted Richmond, California high school graduate – participated in the 2010 Summer Institute. They were joined by our *New Voices Are Rising's* Summer Program Associate, Devilla Ervin, a twenty-one year old community-college student and summer program alumnus from West Oakland. Devilla served as a peer-mentor working along side *New Voices* Program Associate, Myesha Williams, and Program Director, Jill Ratner. All but one of the students completed the program. That student – the recent graduate – left for higher paid employment so that he could save money for college.

As a culminating activity, students testified at the August 4th meeting of the Bay Area Air Quality Management District Board, calling on the Board to adopt and support policies that advance both climate protection and air quality. The students focused on four issues: refinery pollution; diesel pollution from freight transport operations; public transit; and residential energy efficiency. They recommended that the Board strengthen oil refinery regulations, support strong state-wide diesel risk reduction rules, encourage relevant agencies to move truck routes away from residential areas, seek funding to subsidize lower transit fares and to increase transit reliability and safety, and encourage home retrofits to reduce energy consumption*.

Thirteen of the fifteen students who completed the program have expressed interest in continuing to work on environmental justice issues during the coming school year.

Background

New Voices Are Rising provides environmental justice and hands-on civics education to high school students with the goal of fostering young community leaders who are committed to social and environmental justice. The project works with students from schools serving low-income communities and communities of color, providing them with information on environmental health issues in their communities; building students' leadership and advocacy skills by encouraging effective collaborative work; and providing students with opportunities to speak out on community issues in real world situations.

Throughout the 2010 Summer Institute, student activities explored environmental justice issues in connection with freight transportation and oil refining – two industries that historically have been major engines of the local economy, but have also had disproportionate impacts on air quality and health in local low-income communities and

* Students cited data showing that nineteen percent of California's energy is expended transporting, delivering and treating water and sewage.

communities of color. These industries also emit large quantities of greenhouse gases, which contribute to global climate change. Our goal was to encourage students to begin identifying policies that could reduce greenhouse gas emissions while also improving health in disadvantaged neighborhoods.

A Diverse Group of Students

Our sixteen Summer Institute students reflected the ethnic and economic diversity of Oakland and nearby heavily impacted cities. Seven of the participating students are Latino; six are African American; three are Asian American (two of Cambodian heritage, one of Chinese heritage). Thirteen are eligible for free or reduced price lunch.



To build community and break the ice, we joined in name games, energizers, and trust building exercises. The group developed a real bond on the first day.

We began recruiting students for the summer program during the spring semester, reaching out to students through the teachers we worked with during the 2009-10 school year. We made presentations in classrooms, and also encouraged teachers to seek out interested students who they thought would benefit from participating in this kind of program. We also worked closely with staff of the Oakland Unified School District College and Career Readiness Office (CCRO) who helped us connect with students who noted an interest in the environment, or in making a difference in their communities, when they applied to CCRO's summer program. All of the Oakland students received course credit for

participating in the program. Most students also received an \$8/hour stipend from either the School District or the Rose Foundation for their participation. One student participated as part of a summer program operated by the YMCA, and two other students participated as volunteers because they could not produce Social Security numbers and therefore were not eligible for School District or Rose Foundation stipends.

The group included students from five of the six traditional Oakland public high schools and two alternative Oakland public high schools, as well as one 2010 Richmond High School graduate. Fourteen students are entering their senior year this fall. One student is entering his junior year.



A student mapping exercise informed a place-based analysis of asthma hospitalization rates. The group explored connections between air quality and health, race and class, arriving at a shared definition of environmental justice.

Summer Program Curriculum

The students worked with *New Voices Are Rising* project staff at least three days each week, for five-and-half hours a day, during the five weeks beginning July 6 and ending August 6, 2010. We met in a room at one of Oakland's older large churches. The room, which was furnished with comfortable couches and had big windows that opened to the outside, made it easy to create a relaxed, collaborative atmosphere. In that space, our activities included warm-up games, mapping exercises and brainstorming. We analyzed

information from readings, videos and online research, as well as information provided in-person by experts on air quality and public health. Students explored and debated smart growth policy, and for their final project, students prepared recommendations and comments to present to the Bay Area Air Quality Management District.

Of course, we had to travel away from our cozy space to see both problems and solutions up close. We visited the Port of Oakland, with a follow-up visit to a nearby community organization to practice using portable monitors that measure particulate pollution in the air.



According to a 2008 Health Risk Assessment by the California Air Resources Board, air breathed by West Oakland residents, next to the busy Port of Oakland, contains 3 times as much diesel particulate matter as does air in the Bay Area as a whole.

We also toured Richmond, California, to see the impacts of petroleum refining and petrochemical production and storage on surrounding neighborhoods.

Another field trip took us to a small park in San Francisco's Bayview/Hunter's Point neighborhood, a historically African-American neighborhood that lives with the legacy of contamination from naval operations during World War II, and later industrial activity. On a piece of land across a narrow strip of bay from the former site of one of California's oldest and dirtiest power plants – which was finally decommissioned after years of neighborhood activism – we worked with staff members from Literacy for Environmental Justice to pull

out invasive weeds in order to allow native plants to re-establish themselves. We ate lunch in the new Bayview/Hunter's Point solar-powered community center, which includes a rooftop rainwater collection system, and a fully self-contained biological sewage treatment system that allows the center to recycle water used to flush toilets. For most of the students, the trip was their first exposure to any alternative to heavily polluting approaches to energy production, transportation and resource management.



At the Eco-Center in the Bayview Hunters Point neighborhood, we learned about the history of environmental struggle in the Bayview and got to see an environmental justice victory first hand. Putting our “hands on the land”, we helped Literacy for Environmental Justice eliminate invasive species and restore native plants. We ended with a tour of the living building that is the off-the-grid Eco-Center.

Students also worked – individually or in pairs – one day a week for five weeks with a local community-based environmental organization. Students had opportunities to report back to the larger group about their work at the outside organization, and how that organization’s work fits into broader efforts to improve air quality and halt climate change.

The students wrote about their experiences in the project’s ongoing blog. To read about the summer in the students’ own words, please go to “Listening to *New Voices*” at newvoicesarising.blogspot.com. We also collected many photos from the summer, at our *New Voices Are Rising* page on Facebook.

The students formed strong friendships and a sense of community. Many have continued to stay in touch with each other through web-based social networking, and in person, as the fall semester has unfolded.

Students left with an understanding of:

- Environmental justice and environmental injustice
- Connections between air quality and health, and between air quality and climate change
- Health disparities as they relate to air quality and climate change
- How goods movement affects air quality and community health
- Case studies of environmental justice struggles in the area identified as the “Toxic Triangle” which includes Richmond, Bayview/Hunters’ Point, and West Oakland
- How refineries affect air quality and community health
- Which regulatory agencies are responsible for protecting air quality
- A range of local organizations that work on air quality, climate and food access issues in Oakland and Richmond

Skills students learned and/or developed:

- Public speaking
- Issue analysis and critical thinking
- Argument development
- Facilitating a group
- Meeting preparation
- How to prepare and give testimony for a government regulatory agency

Student accomplishments:

- Developed and reported their own air quality and climate protection recommendations to policy makers
- Fully participated in a debate on the pros and cons of transit-oriented urban infill development

A New Generation of Environmental Leaders

Thirteen of the fifteen students who completed the program want to continue to work on environmental or environmental justice issues during the coming school year.

Possible 2010 projects include:

- Registering, educating and mobilizing voters to protect California’s Global Warming Solutions Act. (On November 2, 2010 California voters will decide whether to suspend this key clean air and climate protection law indefinitely.)
- Monitoring pollution in residential neighborhoods near the Port of Oakland and Oakland railyards.
- Informing peers about toxic metals in jewelry and other products for teens.
- Educating fellow students and engaging in advocacy to encourage the California Air Resources Board to retain and implement strong diesel truck emission control rules.

- Teaching fellow students about diesel pollution and advocating improved pollution controls on trucks, including port equipment at the Port of Oakland.
- Connecting schools with local urban agriculture organizations, and starting or expanding gardening programs on campus.



“I would absolutely continue to do environmental justice. I believe that it’s an issue that affects everybody and that we should fight for, and inform our community about.”
Pamela Tapia, Class of 2011, EXCEL High School, McClymonds campus, West Oakland.

List of Student Externship Placements

Asian Pacific Environmental Network
Assemblymember Nancy Skinner's office
Center for Environmental Health
City Slicker Farms
Communities for a Better Environment
MA'AT Youth Academy
Oakland Food Connection
Rising Sun Energy Center
Sierra Club, SF Bay Chapter
West Oakland Environmental Indicators Project

List of Field Trips

Port of Oakland/BNSF Railyard
Richmond Toxic Tour
Literacy for Environmental Justice's Eco-Center: Bayview/Hunter's Point
Alameda County Public Health Department
Oakland Green Youth Arts and Media Center
UC Berkeley: Rachel Morello-Frosch
City Hall Hearing room to prepare for debate
Bay Area Air Quality Management District meeting

Speakers

Michael Kent – Ombudsman, Contra Costa County Health Department
Rachel Morello-Frosch, PhD – UC Berkeley School of Public Health
Tracy Zhu and Anthony Khalil – Literacy for Environmental Justice
Tammy Lee – Alameda County Public Health Department
Brian Beveridge – West Oakland Environmental Indicators Project

List of participating high schools

- EXCEL High School Law and Government Academy – McClymonds Educational Complex
- Leadership Preparatory High School – Castlemont Community of Small Schools
- Mandela High School Law and Public Service Academy – Fremont Federation of High Schools
- Oakland High School
- Oakland Technical High School
- Youth Empowerment School
- Emiliano Zapata Street Academy