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Grassroots Group Comité Progreso de Lamont Recognized for Outstanding Volunteerism and Advocacy for Community Improvement Projects

Oakland, CA, 7/7/23: Rose Foundation for Communities and the Environment announced grassroots group Comité Progreso de Lamont, as the winner of the 2023 Anthony Grassroots Prize, an annual $1,000 award recognizing an outstanding example of inspirational grassroots environmental activism.

Tucked between the mountains and farmlands at the southern end of California’s Central Valley sits the unincorporated town of Lamont. In the United States, unincorporated areas do not have a municipal government. This means that residents often face greater challenges to receiving funding and resources for public improvements because they quite literally cannot call City Hall for help. Add in a legacy of discrimination and active disinvestment in farmworker communities like Lamont and the result is a community facing the brunt of environmental impacts like poor air quality, pesticide exposure, and flooding.

Anthony Prize winner, Comité Progreso de Lamont (CPL) is returning power to Lamont, campaigning in place of local government for community improvement projects. The volunteer-led group’s mission is to achieve a healthy environment and to improve the quality of life for Lamont residents by building a collective community voice to advocate for change. Since its inception, CPL has fought for and won numerous community improvement projects and protections for residents. In total, the group has helped secure over $125 million in funding to improve infrastructure, water, and air quality in Lamont. They’ve engaged in advocacy on oil and gas drilling regulations, affordable housing, and sidewalk and street repairs.

CPL was co-founded by grassroots advocate Jose Mireles in 2010. Mireles grew up in Lamont where he witnessed first-hand the effects disinvestment had on the community. He formed CPL to address these injustices through grassroots organizing. Despite struggling with chronic illness, Mireles played an instrumental role in the group’s success. His unwavering belief that Lamont deserved better, and that public improvements could be achieved through community advocacy, served as guiding principles for the organization. Jose passed away in July of 2022. His legacy lives on in some of the group’s biggest wins, highlighted below.

Lamont has faced frequent and devastating floods due to practices in adjacent farmlands that have destabilized the topsoil and diverted the region’s mountain water runoff into the community. The floods have damaged schools and churches, raised insurance premiums, and disincentivized community development. After years of research, advocacy, and collaboration with organizations and governments, CPL helped the county secure a $14 million Urban Flood Protection Grant to protect its community. The Caliente Creek Urban Flood Protection Project will “remove the agricultural development and associated berms, revert the property to a natural vegetated area, and prohibit future development that conflicts with floodplain standards.” Not only
is the grant a win for the environment, but also for the community as it will decrease flood insurance, boost community morale and attract new development.

For decades, residents of Lamont have struggled to find affordable housing. It is not uncommon for community members to convert garages to bedrooms or to see sheds rigged with air conditioning units. With many residents working in agriculture and retail, low-income housing options are essential to keeping the community housed. In the face of this struggle, CPL advocated for more affordable housing and general development in the community. In 2019 the group got its wish, with a funding award to bring low-income housing, sidewalks and bike lanes to Lamont. The group worked with the community to develop a 42-unit apartment complex for low-income families and built over 4 miles of sidewalks and bike lanes in previously unwalkable parts of the community.

Without investment, many of Lamont’s public spaces have become dilapidated and forgotten. This is true of Lamont Park, a central connecting point in the town, which for years has lacked the amenities needed to attract community members. In 2021, amidst 480 other applicants, CPL attained a $6.5 million grant to improve Lamont Park. To create a plan that reflected the needs and wants of Lamont residents, CPL performed community outreach, elevating the voices of high schoolers, parents, and elders. Community-level input, collaboration with other local organizations, and coordination with the county Parks and Recreation department helped CPL bring funding and pride back to the Lamont community park. “When you pave a sidewalk, you connect neighbors. When you pave a road, you connect a block. When you build a park, you connect a community.” – Timoteo Prado, Community Outreach Coordinator at CPL.

Comité Progreso de Lamont is an outstanding example of grassroots community activism. The organization serves as a voice for its community, persistently advocating and working in collaboration with other organizations and government to achieve the resources, funding, and attention its community deserves. Through its advocacy process, CPL has built unity among the community and the resulting successes have brought back pride. In the words of the late Jose Mireles, “Go out and speak and things will get done. There will be changes.” The Rose Foundation is grateful to support organizations like CPL and grassroots leaders like Jose Mireles, in the fight for healthier and more just communities.

ABOUT the Anthony Grassroots Prize
The Anthony Grassroots Prize – this year celebrating 22 years of uplifting grassroots environmental leadership through an award, cash prize, and public recognition – was endowed by Juliette Anthony, a lifelong environmental activist who has been recognized for her work in protecting the Santa Monica Mountains, banning the toxic gasoline additive MTBE, promoting solar power, and publicizing the negative environmental impacts of ethanol. To learn more about the Anthony Grassroots Prize, please visit http://rosefdn.org/anthony-grassroots-prize.

ABOUT Rose Foundation for Communities and the Environment
Rose Foundation for Communities and the Environment supports community-based advocacy to promote conservation, equity, and justice through grant-making and direct service programs. Rose Foundation’s focus includes grassroots activism, watershed protection, environmental justice, and consumer rights. Rose also administers New Voices Are Rising, a youth leadership development and environmental justice advocacy training program. To learn more about the Rose Foundation, please visit http://rosefdn.org.