

Community Profiles



Building Leadership for Social Change in Boyle Heights



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We appreciate the willingness of Juana Mena, Esthefanie Solano, and Lucy Herrera to share their personal stories of struggle and activism in Boyle Heights.

Each woman was courageously vulnerable as they shared some profound challenges and inspiring triumphs. It is individuals like them who make our communities and world a better place. Hearing their stories may encourage others to do the same. We also give thanks to Jennifer Ybarra at The California Endowment for her support in uplifting these narratives.

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Introduction

The California Endowment's Building Healthy Communities (BHC) initiative empowers youth and adults in communities that have experienced racial and socioeconomic disadvantage and historical injustice to have their voice heard in policymaking spaces. Through collective power, BHC aims to increase the opportunities, supports, and resources in communities, thereby promoting greater equity, quality of life, and health outcomes for youth and families.

Fourteen sites throughout California comprise the BHC initiative. One site is Boyle Heights, located to the east of downtown Los Angeles. A vibrant, culturally rich Latino community, Boyle Heights has also suffered from disinvestment in programs for youth; harsh discipline policies in schools that perpetuate the school-to-prison pipeline; lack of access to health care, particularly for its large immigrant population; and impending gentrification, among other challenges. Boyle Heights Building Healthy Communities (BHBHC) has tried to address these issues by mobilizing young people, residents, and community-based organizations to advance policy campaigns that increase investment in positive youth development and create a Youth Development Department to coordinate resources; that finance the implementation of the School Climate Bill of Rights¹ in the Los Angeles Unified School District; that increase funding for My Health LA²; and that ensure that development in the Eastside of Los Angeles is both equitable and accountable to long-time residents.

Youth and adult resident leaders are essential to these campaigns. They know their communities the best—the needs and the most viable and beneficial solutions. They are the ones who have been in Boyle Heights long before many staff of community-based organizations, politicians, and systems leaders entered their posts. It is they who will stay long after others move on. This brief introduces three remarkable residents of Boyle Heights who were already on a path to make a significant difference in the community but who, upon encountering BHC, were able to have an even greater impact. They represent the many heroes in Boyle Heights fighting for a more equitable and healthy community for all.

¹ The SCBR was passed in 2013. The resolution outlines actions that must be taken to keep students in a safe classroom and healthy environment helpful to learning.

² My Health LA is a program of the Los Angeles County Department of Health Services that provides primary health care at no cost to eligible residents of Los Angeles. It is a program that can be accessed by unauthorized immigrants.

Juana Mena

Ten-Year Boyle Heights Resident – Single Mother – Woman of Faith – Brain Tumor Survivor – Community Leader

Personal History

Juana is from Guadalajara, Mexico, and is the oldest of six siblings. Her family often struggled economically. Sometimes they stretched a meal of soup or beans across several days. She began working at fifteen to help support her family. In her early twenties, a relative encouraged her to come to Los Angeles to work as a caretaker for an ill young man in Boyle Heights. Juana loved Boyle Heights from the start, and stayed with the young man until his death. After that position, she worked as a housekeeper in Diamond Bar for several years. She would send fifty percent of her earnings to her mother in Mexico. Without much support in the U.S., Juana was often taken advantage of by people who threatened to turn her over to immigration.



In Los Angeles, Juana had two daughters but separated from their father. One child died in infancy, and this devastating loss significantly marked Juana. She fell into a deep depression and suffered other health issues, but she did not attend to them because she had to work to support her remaining daughter. Juana was hesitant to accept public assistance because she had heard stories that her daughter could be taken away from her. Having lost one child already, she did not want to risk losing another. Mother and daughter lived in various rental units throughout Los Angeles. As Juana began talking to people, she started to learn that she did have some rights. She decided to apply for public housing. Her second application led her to the Ramona Gardens Housing Project. Juana was delighted to return with her daughter to Boyle Heights. In her interview, Juana said that *“coming back to Boyle Heights changed my life. I felt like I was with people who cared for me. I live happily here. God gave me a home—a place to be with my daughter.”*

Entry into Social Activism

While Juana grew up lacking many material goods, she experienced lots of love and unity in her family. She came to see life as beautiful despite hardships. Even in her early difficult years in the United States, she savored small pleasures, like a can of Coca Cola that she had never seen before in her hometown or the first purse that she bought with her savings that she still owns and uses today. Juana tries to see good in people and situations and recognizes our shared humanity. Her positive and compassionate orientation, along with her love for God, gives her hope for change. Juana believes strongly in helping others and trying to make a difference in her community. Two values that particularly guide her work are honesty and transparency. These values were instilled in her by her parents, but they were reinforced by life experiences, including Building Healthy Communities. Juana shared that *“being honest and transparent opened many doors for me.”* These doors will be described shortly.

Over the years living in various parts of Los Angeles, one observation that Juana made is that in some instances, residents are only invited to participate in an activity or event so that organizations can demonstrate numbers of people present, but that genuine engagement is not sought. She also noted that sometimes residents who are part of an organization are protective of their status with the organization, making it difficult for new residents to become involved. Juana herself had been told by members of the community that she could not become involved with certain organizations because she was not sufficiently prepared.

Upon returning to Boyle Heights with her daughter a decade ago, Juana engaged in various community activities that began to show her that she could be more meaningfully involved with community organizations to work for positive change. For example, she was a volunteer with Summer Night Lights, a program which keeps recreation centers and parks open later during the summer, as well as with the Ramona Gardens community center, where she assisted with arts and crafts classes. In addition to service-oriented activities, Juana moved on to greater community activism, working with LA Voice, Legacy LA, and the Advancement Project. In one undertaking, she surveyed residents on police-community relations.

Juana discovered BHBHC at a community outreach event held by the collaborative. This occasion was soon followed up by a much larger General Assembly bringing together community members and systems leaders. Juana attended this event and took advantage of the opportunity to spontaneously ask questions of Dr. Katz, head of the Los Angeles County Department of Health Services. Instead of being supported by many fellow community members for speaking up, Juana met reprimand. Her “error” was posing an unscripted question. The incident encouraged her to seek out a community organizer she had met at her first BHBHC community outreach event, Victoria Ortega from Clinica Moseñor Oscar A. Romero. Juana told Ms. Ortega that after her experience at the General Assembly, she wanted to learn how to ask questions “correctly.” Ms. Ortega welcomed Juana in a warm, friendly way that she had not often experienced.



Through Clinica Romero and with Victoria Ortega’s help, Juana became more involved with BHBHC. Soon after her involvement with Clinica Romero and BHBHC, Juana participated in a leadership training for residents offered by Vision y Compromiso through the BHC initiative. At the end of the course, an announcement was made that BHBHC was looking for community residents to be part of its Steering Committee³. Juana thought about applying, but as had happened on different occasions, she was discouraged by other community residents from applying. Fortunately, she had allies among members of BHBHC who had come to know her and her strengths, and who appreciated her honesty and directness. Juana shared that, “*They (BHBHC and organizational leaders) saw potential in me. They saw that I speak with the truth and say things as they are. They believed in me and my ability to be a liaison between the community and organizations in the BHBHC. They gave me an opportunity. They helped me believe in myself.*” Juana applied to become a Steering Committee representative and she was accepted. A new door opened for Juana.

³ BHBHC has a Steering Committee comprised of youth and adult residents and staff from community-based organizations. It is the decision-making body of BHBHC.

Transformative Experiences with BHBHC

Juana not only became a Steering Committee representative for BHBHC, but also became its coordinator⁴ for community engagement—first for the Prevention Workgroup, and then for the Schools Workgroup. To carry out her work, Juana found tremendous inspiration and encouragement in BHBHC Hub staff. Juana noted that Hub staff faces stress and responsibility with a smile and warmth that she seeks to emulate. In addition, a great benefit of the BHBHC Hub is its relative neutrality. Though not immune to organization- and community-driven politics, it offers opportunities and support for residents that may not be possible elsewhere and it is able to be more independent when providing information to community members.

In the environment offered by BHBHC, Juana has been able to thrive as a community leader. For example, Juana found a solid place in the Schools Workgroup. Here, she found her voice listened to and her ideas and opinions taken into account. No one made her feel less and she was given the chance to try new things. For example, in the Summer of 2017, Juana, working in partnership with the Alliance for California Traditional Arts, designed and led an eight-week series on quilt-making that not only helped participants develop and express a creative skill, but also to build social support and increase knowledge about issues facing schools in Boyle Heights. To provide political education during the series, Juana worked with seven representatives of community-based organizations. The event was a great success: Seventeen community residents of various ages attended regularly and may join the Schools Workgroup campaign to increase investment in funding implementation of the School Climate Bill of Rights in Los Angeles schools.

Juana is also very active in connecting community residents with programs and services available in The Wellness Center, where the BHBHC Hub office is based and which houses seventeen nonprofit organizations at the time of this writing. Juana spends time at BHBHC weekly, serving as a liaison between community residents and organizations in the collaborative. Juana shared the following powerful reflection on how the experience and opportunity provided by BHBHC has been life-changing:

“My world used to be just Ramona Gardens, but there is need everywhere. I can’t believe how many needs there are in my community. BHBHC allows me to help more people. I listen to people—so many just need to be heard. I also try to find people a place to go to get help. I have found that people often appreciate seeing that even someone like me who is not affiliated with a particular organization in the community has been heard and listened to, and is there to help them.”

Juana sees her work with BHBHC as a job. Looking at it in this way inspires her to make BHBHC a priority and a responsibility and to commit to it whole-heartedly. Her values of honesty, transparency, and compassion guide her work. The example below shows how Juana lives her values in BHBHC:

⁴ BHBHC is comprised of three work groups focused on prevention, schools, and neighborhoods. Each work group has two co-chairs who serve as leaders of the work group. In addition, each work group has a coordinator for community engagement and a coordinator for youth engagement.

“Through BHBHC, I have had the chance to go to many events and learn much. One day, I was sitting in a taxi and the driver told me that he had just signed up for My Health LA and the person who enrolled him told him he was only allowed to go to the clinic that was supporting him in the enrollment process. I knew this wasn’t true, and I believe in speaking the truth. I shared with him what I knew. Today, this person has found a clinic that he likes and is attending various programs at The Wellness Center based on our conversation.”

Through her participation in BHBHC, Juana learned about the political landscape; about how decisions are made that affect her community; and about opportunities and resources that could improve life for community residents. She also developed new relationships with people and organizations that sought to make Boyle Heights a better place for everyone who lives there. BHBHC is one site of fourteen, and in June 2017, Juana had the unique opportunity to meet individuals from across all Building Healthy Communities sites in Sacramento. Juana called this experience a *“parting of the Nile”*—a significant moment for her.

The event was comprised of a convening at The California Endowment’s Sacramento office and visits to elected officials. Juana described the great meaning that the gathering had for her in this statement: *“I got to learn from all fourteen sites. I saw similar needs in so many places. I realized that we have to unite more and create a larger and stronger base and movement for change.”* At the end of the day, teams from each site were invited to offer a report to the whole group about highlights of the experience. Participants from Boyle Heights encouraged Juana to do so. She was the last speaker. Her paraphrase of her speech and her description of her feelings provide a vivid and poignant testament to what BHC signifies to her. It is as follows:

“I couldn’t believe they asked me to speak in front of everyone. I had lots of ideas in my head but I didn’t have anything written down. My way of speaking can be very colorful, but I decided to just be myself. I started talking about my life and about me. I told them that being in the state capital made me feel like I had been given the keys to the world. I was honored that I was given the chance to stand up and speak on behalf of my community. I thanked members of The California Endowment for giving me the chance to be there, and for taking BHC to Boyle Heights. I told them how I had benefited from the My Health LA program. I also shared that by being part of BHC, I saw the need for mental health services in the community, and restorative justice in schools. I told them loudly that I was undocumented. My daughter was worried when I left for Sacramento—she was worried that I would not return. BHC empowered me and gave me the courage to go to Sacramento and to be able to talk in front of people—politicians, foundation leaders, and individuals from other sites. Thanks to BHC, I knew that when I speak, I can be listened to. I went to Sacramento as an undocumented woman so I could speak on behalf of other undocumented people in my community who live in fear and who don’t yet have the courage to speak out.”

While BHBHC empowered Juana to become a leader for change in her community, it also benefitted her in very personal ways. Juana had just been released from the hospital after being diagnosed with a tumor in her brain when she attended her first BHBHC General Assembly. She also suffered from depression and rheumatoid arthritis. She didn't know how she would pay for her medications. *"I thought I was going to die,"* Juana admitted. Speaking with a local clinic, she had been told she wasn't eligible for My Health LA. It was at this General Assembly that she learned otherwise. Juana found support from community organizations and even systems leaders at this event. She was given assistance in signing up for my Health LA and she now has a medical home and access to her medications. Then, receiving small stipends for her role on the BHBHC Steering Committee and as coordinator for community engagement was also pivotal. They contributed to her ability to pay her rent and utility bills, to buy clothes and food for her daughter, and to sometimes take her daughter to get ice cream or pancakes.

Vision and Hope for the Future

In a reflection on the influence of BHBHC on herself and on her community, Juana made the following comment. It is a powerful and eloquent statement that is fitting as a closing for this introduction to a remarkable community leader in Boyle Heights.

"BHBHC changed my life positively, starting with access to health care. I see BHBHC like a rainbow that appears on a cloudy, rainy day. I am enjoying the rainbow today. I hope that the initiative won't end in 2020 but that it continues with greater involvement of community members. There are so many people with the same needs as I had—people who feel like they are less than others or who have been made to feel that way. People who don't have the opportunity to speak, but who would like to speak. BHC offered a path that we could take, and that path must continue."

Esthefanie Solano

Fifteen-Year Boyle Heights Resident – Youth Leader and Organizer – Trailblazer – Future Entrepreneur and Communications Specialist

Personal History

Esthefanie Solano was born in Guadalajara, Mexico. She is twenty-four years old, and came to the United States when she was six and a half. Her parents separated when she was young. Her father remained in Colima, Mexico, and she migrated to the U.S. with her mother and older sister. They were the last on her mother’s side of the family to do so. Her grandfather had owned income-generating property in Guadalajara, but due to corruption, he lost everything he had and needed to start a new life. The move of her grandparents from Guadalajara to Boyle Heights sparked a family migration north. Esthefanie’s immediate family settled in with her grandparents in Boyle Heights when they first arrived. The reality they faced as an undocumented family in Los Angeles is that undocumented workers are not paid enough and survival alone is difficult. Her mother saved for many years so that they could move to a separate “back house” that they could share with her aunt. It is in this home in Boyle Heights that Esthefanie spent most of her life. Recently, she moved out of her family home so she could have her own place—an apartment that she shares with a close friend. This move is significant not only because it marks a transition from childhood to adulthood, but also because it is a testament to the many positive steps that Esthefanie has taken in her life to become a community leader with a career and plans for her future. Esthefanie is the only one in her family to have been able to develop a career around the fight for social justice.



Entry into Social Activism

When Esthefanie attended Roosevelt High School in Boyle Heights, it still consisted of seven small learning academies. She participated in an academy focused on math and science. Her teachers always encouraged students to be active in the school and the community, and they frequently invited community groups to present on their work. One day in 2008, an organizer from Inner City Struggle



(ICS) spoke about their United Students program. He described the issues that members fought for, how people could be involved, and that snacks were provided during meetings. This caught Esthefanie’s attention, and she decided to give United Students a try. She began attending general meetings during school hours. At the time, she was just getting to know about the group and not sure if she wanted to invest her time with ICS.

In the summer between her sophomore and junior year, Esthefanie had the chance to be involved in a participatory youth research project through UCLA’s Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access. This opportunity proved to be transformational for her. It involved taking a course on education theory and research, followed by investigation in the community to determine how education budget cuts were impacting schools and communities. She joined a team from South Central Los Angeles and they walked around neighborhoods interviewing passerby and businesses owners about their views on the budget

cuts. In doing so, Esthefanie came to realize that students in South Central were facing very similar issues to what students in Boyle Heights were facing. She became aware that there were serious issues affecting the education of youth in low-income communities of color and she could no longer just sit back and not take action. At the end of the project, the students gave a presentation and suggested recommendations for next steps. Esthefanie was concerned that the effort ended there. *“We did research and made recommendations, but we didn’t follow through on any of our demands. That is when I decided to go ‘all hands on deck’ with ICS. I understood that with ICS I could push for demands and not only make suggestions.”* It has now been ten years since Esthefanie has been wholeheartedly active with ICS. The values that guide her work in the community are resiliency, love, accountability, and honesty.

Transformative Experiences with BHBHC

At the time Esthefanie committed to ICS in 2008, there was growing attention among education justice organizations in Los Angeles around school climate, Positive Behavior Intervention Supports, and Restorative Justice. This was also the period in which The California Endowment unveiled its BHC initiative. The launch in Boyle Heights began with an intensive planning process that involved input from hundreds of residents of different ages, as well as community-based organizations. Esthefanie participated in the planning process as a member of ICS. She recalled her initial feelings about the undertaking as the following:

“When I learned that TCE was going to make a ten-year, multi-million dollar investment in Boyle Heights I was excited and hopeful. I saw the many ways that Boyle Heights was lacking. I could visualize the changes that we could make in ten years. I saw this as a way to tie our everyday work and the experiences of young people to bigger things that affect the community.”

Her voice, and those of her peers involved in education reform, made the transformation of school climate to a respectful and supportive learning environment a key goal of BHBHC.

The BHC initiative has offered Esthefanie opportunities for learning and growth that would not have been possible otherwise. The statement below demonstrates the great extent to which BHC supported her leadership development:

“I was one of the folks to have lots of development opportunities from TCE. Nonprofits don’t often have the budget to send people to conferences and trainings. Because TCE supported organizations, core leaders from all sites could participate in capacity building. I was involved in trainings on youth organizing and communications. I attended a conference on equity. I participated in cross-site meetings. These are rare to see in nonprofits because there is no budget. I feel lucky and grateful for the capacity building opportunities that I have had.”

In addition to offering occasions for learning, BHC provided the chance to interact with individuals from various organizations and communities. *“One of the most beautiful things I gained,”* remarked Esthefanie, *“is that I’m connected to folks in Boyle Heights, Oakland, Merced, and City Heights that do youth organizing and who believe that if we support and mentor young people they will wake up and work to achieve change.”* Such interactions not only built her network of colleagues, but also prompted Esthefanie to be more conscious about intersectionality; to “think outside the box;” and to recognize that there are still places in California that haven’t had the same victories experienced in Boyle Heights and Los Angeles—making statewide work just as important as local work. Being affiliated with ICS grounded her firmly in an education justice framework and placed her in an organizational culture with like-minded individuals, but being part of BHBHC expanded Esthefanie’s relationships with organizations with different focus areas, perspectives, and work styles that encouraged her to grow in new ways. In the account that follows, Esthefanie explains how her thinking and view of Boyle Heights expanded as a result of BHBHC:

“Being around others in BHC who do this work allowed me to learn about other topics. At ICS, I was raised in a world focused on education justice. Looking at issues from that lens, and analyzing power dynamics in schools and the district, were natural to me. Having interactions with adults in different BHBHC spaces helped me to understand the complexities of issues and to realize that we are all dependent on one another’s work. (From the Prevention Work Group), I came to understand the challenges with health care and why people in Boyle Heights have limited access. With the Neighborhoods Work Group, I participated in conversations on creating a Youth Development Department and came to see how this impacts the youth I work with in schools. All of these opportunities have helped me to get a better sense of where Boyle Heights is today and where it needs to go. I interact mainly with students in Roosevelt High School; they are my base. I am tired after work and I don’t walk through Boyle Heights. I am not capturing some changes that are happening in the community. The BHBHC space allows me to not lose track of what is happening outside of schools. The experiences of my youth don’t end at Roosevelt High School. For example, the rising rents faced by their families aren’t magically shut away. I am no longer limited in how I see Boyle Heights today and it informs my actions.”

Esthefanie is a much stronger youth organizer as a result of being involved with BHBHC. She has learned approaches and tactics from other organizers on how to better work with youth, and she is more aware of services in Boyle Heights that youth can access. ICS is not a service organization, but their members do have need for services. Through BHBHC, Esthefanie feels that she has developed a robust network by which she can better support youth and their families. These relationships are helpful not only for service referrals, but also for connecting ICS youth with other organizations in Boyle Heights where they can continue their leadership and activism. ICS currently only works with youth in high school, but as a result of BHBHC, Esthefanie has been able to find new organizations with which her youth can

participate. An added benefit is that she can continue to work with these youth and observe their development, as depicted in the following remark:

“I like that I don’t have to lose touch with my students if they stay in the Boyle Heights area and that I can still interact with them. I encourage them to plug into the BHC space. (One of my youth) went to East Los Angeles Women’s Center, and she has grown so much there.”

Not only do the organizations that are part of BHBHC influence Esthefanie, but so do the youth with whom she works. BHBHC has allowed Esthefanie to engage with youth with different experiences, interests, and capacities. The work of ICS is very much based in schools, and many youth who become involved have high internal motivation to participate. Esthefanie hasn’t had a chance to work with many youth who are no longer in school or who don’t fit a “traditional” leader role. The opportunity has left an indelible mark on Esthefanie, as can be seen in this statement.

“I learned to look for leadership in unexpected places. I met amazing individuals in the BHC space and in other organizations. I have come to learn and understand where other students are coming from. I realized that even though they are not part of my ICS cohort, I could still support them and use with them approaches I have learned from ICS. I remember (a young woman) who was shy as a freshman. She worked with Volunteers of America Los Angeles but was part of BHBHC. I’ve seen her when we all work together. She is now in her senior year and she has transformed so much. There are many young people whose leadership we can build together.”

BHBHC is now in its seventh year, and Esthefanie has grown into young adulthood during these years. Having entered BHBHC at the age of 18 as a youth organizer with extensive knowledge and skills, she sometimes struggled to be taken seriously. Esthefanie recalls that *“I was super young and super young looking. People who didn’t know me sometimes determined my expertise based on what I looked like. But I knew my voice had power.”* And Esthefanie did indeed use her expertise and power to contribute to BHBHC through various roles. For example, she started out as a member of the Youth Engagement Committee, served as a youth Steering Committee representative for two years, was a Youth Engagement Committee co-chair for two years, mentored youth at the Sisterhood Rising Leadership Retreat⁵, supported youth Social Media Ambassadors of BHBHC for two years, and is presently the coordinator for the Social Media Ambassadors⁶. These distinct roles demonstrate Esthefanie’s

⁵ The Sisterhood Rising Leadership Retreat is a five-day program sponsored by The California Endowment (TCE) which brings together young women from across BHC sites. The program is focused on developing young women’s leadership and strengthening their ability to advocate for gender, health and racial justice.

⁶ The Social Media Ambassadors is a program of BHBHC. Youth receive a stipend for a one-year commitment to support BHBHC campaigns with social media posts. Social Media Ambassadors receive training and ongoing support to facilitate their work.

progression of increased knowledge, skills, and confidence. She turns 24 in 2018. As such, she will no longer be considered a youth in BHBHC. Her time with BHBHC has influenced her plans for the future and her hope for the community.

Vision and Hope for the Future

At one time, Esthefanie had planned to return to college to study psychology. The election of Donald Trump as U.S. President has caused her to re-evaluate her plan. She is mindful of her immediate and extended family in the U.S., and their potential future under this administration. Esthefanie intends to save money for the next four years and return to Mexico when she is 28 years old and open her own business. While the move is prompted by the need to help give her family other options in the current political climate, it also is motivated by a desire to recoup in Mexico some of what her family lost when her grandfather was swindled. Esthefanie hopes that she can remain connected to work in Boyle Heights as a consultant even if she is in Mexico. To that end, she has decided that the best skills for her to develop with further study is digital communications and marketing. Her work on the campaign to pass and implement the School Climate Bill of Rights with BHC directly influenced her decision to change her education focus. Esthefanie explained her rationale in this way:

“With the School Climate Bill of Rights campaign, I learned that we can pass amazing policy but if the people implementing the policy still have the same framework of deficit, then we might not see the impact that we thought we would see. We didn’t think that much about narrative change for the SCBR. The district now is not doing it justice. Communications and narrative change is key in campaigns. I want to support that, and as a consultant I can still be plugged in even if I am not physically here.”

Even if her future takes her to Mexico, Boyle Heights has been Esthefanie’s home for over fifteen years and she cares deeply about it. There have been many improvements in Boyle Heights since Esthefanie has been active with ICS and BHBHC. For example, Roosevelt High School used to have a 60% disappearance rate; last year, 80% of students graduated. Esthefanie worries that impending gentrification will result in displacement, and new people will benefit from the changes that she and others fought for. She also is concerned that many people will be pushed further east—and unincorporated East L.A. offers fewer protections for the undocumented. Esthefanie hopes that in the remaining years of BHBHC, more community residents can be educated and engaged so that they can help influence what happens in the future. As a committed and skilled organizer, Esthefanie will be among those working to ensure that residents have a say in guiding the future of Boyle Heights.

Lucy Herrera

Life-Long Boyle Heights Resident – Youth Leader and Organizer – First Generation College Graduate – Future Graduate Student in Public Policy

Personal History

Lucy Herrera is twenty-four years old and was born and raised in Boyle Heights. She is the third of five children; she has two sisters and two brothers. They grew up in the Ramona Gardens housing project. Although gang activity and police surveillance were frequent, Lucy looks tenderly upon her upbringing in the neighborhood, captured in these heartfelt words: *“I love my community. I try not to focus on the negative. It is culturally rich and it made me strong.”* Her equanimity and appreciation is striking given that she experienced profound loss in this community as well. When she was a senior in high school, the stepfather who raised her since infancy was killed in a drive-by shooting. His death significantly impacted Lucy’s family, and she was torn between going on to college or helping her family.



At the urging of mentors like Lou Calanche at Legacy LA, Lucy decided to go to college. She came to see that by going to college she might be of greater help to her family and her community in the future. Going to college itself was a great achievement. When Lucy was growing up, Ramona Gardens did not have a strong college going culture. Even the high school she attended in Lincoln Heights had low expectations of youth. Lucy related a time that she went to visit a counselor at her high school. She told the counselor that she was interested in applying to college and that she would like information. The counselor judged Lucy by her appearance and by her social circle, and dissuaded her from considering college. He told her that students needed a Grade Point Average of 3.0 to qualify. His attitude was disheartening and represented an experience that youth in the community had all too often. Lucy had a GPA of 3.8. Had it not been for mentors at Legacy LA, Lucy might not have embarked on a path to college. With their support, she became a first-generation college student; attended the University of California, Riverside; and earned a B.A. degree in political science.

Entry into Social Activism

Lucy’s first contact with a program in the community was through the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles. It primarily focused on homework help after school as opposed to working towards community change. One day, Lucy attended a meeting in Ramona Gardens focused on police brutality in the housing project. She had witnessed an unfortunate incident involving youth and police. Few youth participated, and none other than Lucy spoke up. *“I asked them (the police) why some things are OK to do in this community and not in others,”* she recounted. Lou Calanche from Legacy LA walked up to her at the end of the meeting and told her,



“You look like a leader.” After that encounter, Lucy joined the first cohort of the Dream Big Youth Council.

At Legacy LA, Lucy learned that it was all right to ask questions about conditions in the community. For too long, the culture in Ramona Gardens had dictated that questions could not be asked. Questioning and talking to others enabled Lucy to get a better understanding of the many ways that her part of Boyle Heights was being neglected. However, not only did she increase her knowledge about the environment but she also discovered that she had the power to make a difference. *“I learned I can speak up and make change. Before, I didn’t know that,”* explained Lucy.

Once at the University of California, Riverside, Lucy continued to work at Legacy LA in the summers. Upon graduation, she returned to Legacy LA full-time to run its leadership development programs, including the Dream Big Youth Council she had participated in many years before. In this role, Lucy hopes to do for others what was once done for her. She elaborates on this point in the following statement.

“I didn’t have many positive mentors in my life. When I did, it helped me to believe in myself. I want to be the same for others—to show that they have the potential to do what they want to do, that they shouldn’t feel less because of the community they come from, and that they can make changes in the community. It does make a difference if the mentor comes from the community. Lou is from our community and it was inspiring that she came back to Ramona Gardens and told us we can do anything we want to do. I see it with my youth also. They are drawn to me. Their appreciation, and making a difference in their lives, motivates me.”

Transformative Experiences with BHBHC

Lucy’s return to Boyle Heights from college in 2015 also marked her entry into BHBHC. By that time Legacy LA had a prominent role in the Invest in Youth campaign of BHBHC. The campaign seeks to shift public investment to positive youth development and to create a Youth Development Department in the City of Los Angeles to coordinate resources. Legacy LA’s Youth Council is the primary source of youth leaders for the campaign. Lucy is in charge of the social justice and political education for youth, and the development of their strategies and skills to organize and advocate for this campaign, and for other issues facing the community. Building youth capacity is a firmly held value for Lucy that can be seen in her approach to working with youth, exemplified in this quote:

“I give youth information about the Invest in Youth campaign, and I talk to them about cities that have a Youth Development Department. I want them to understand why we need a Youth Development Department so they can have the tools to advocate successfully. I also break down the city budget so youth can understand it—and communicate it to others. I try to prepare youth so they can facilitate conversations on these topics with other youth. I believe it is better if the information comes from youth than an adult. I am all about youth advocacy and passing down the torch.”

BHBHC has given Lucy access to organizing, policy, and research organizations such as SCOPE LA, Advancement Project, and the Pat Brown Institute—all of which have expanded her own knowledge and skills that she can then share with youth. *“BHC has given us tools that we can pass down to future generations, like doing a power analysis,”* stated Lucy. *“I had never been exposed to that before, but I now share it with youth. They get it. We wouldn’t have that, or in that depth, without BHC. I have been given tools by BHC to better serve the community.”*

In addition to training opportunities, Lucy was selected to serve as a mentor for the Sisterhood Rising Leadership Retreat. This experience greatly influenced and impacted her. She met youth mentors and youth leaders from across BHC sites in California. She also built new relationships and exchanged ideas about strategies and tactics for working with youth on community change. In addition, Lucy experienced the importance of sisterhood and healing. This was a particularly important takeaway from the retreat for Lucy. She explained its substantial value as follows:

“We had the chance to step back and talk about the issues we were facing, and take time to heal. I was introduced to the idea of sister circles. I saw their benefits at the retreat. I didn’t think much of them before and had never incorporated them into our leadership program. After the retreat, I saw that they are greatly needed in our community. I now have started gender groups at Legacy LA.”

Finally, being part of BHBHC underscored for Lucy the importance of collaboration and youth power. *“To do work effectively, we need to all be team players,”* she explained. *“Different organizations assist by their expertise. I learned how to work in collaboration to move a policy along, rather than working in a silo or doing our own thing.”* Effective advocacy also involves including community members in identifying problems and solutions. *“They are the experts,”* acknowledged Lucy. *“We need to equip them to create solutions to the injustices that they face every day. BHC helped me to see the power of youth to effect change.”*

Vision and Hope for the Future

Although Lucy was a political science major in college, she learned more about politics, government, and civics through her work with Legacy LA and BHBHC. Her intention had been to return to school and study law, but now that she has learned about the importance of advocacy and policy work, she has switched her career goals and plans to study public policy. In the long-term, she hopes to stay involved with youth.

Lucy’s hope for Boyle Heights is that work started under BHBHC can continue. Boyle Heights is at a critical juncture as a result of mounting gentrification. It is a time for residents and organizations to work together so that more people can remain in the area—and so that it can be a more equitable place not surrounded by environmental pollution and with more youth going to college.