



California Trees

Winter 2014

Taking Time Real Conversations About Working Within Disadvantaged Communities

By Ashley Mastin

Environmental justice. It's a concept that has gained traction over the last decade, but one that many in the urban forest community still need to fully integrate into our work.

In California, environmental justice has become a major priority for the state and many of the projects that are funded by state agencies. California state law defines environmental justice as "the fair treatment of people of all races, cultures, and incomes with respect to the development, adoption, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies."

Ensuring environmental justice and working in disadvantaged communities is challenging. Volunteers and community groups that are actively seeking to plant trees in their neighborhoods are relatively easy to work with. Cultivating connections in areas that struggle with big issues, like unemployment, crime, or food security – and which also



desperately need trees – takes more time and resources.

California has an ambitious goal to reduce greenhouse gas emissions AND significantly increase the level of investment in disadvantaged communities. This is an incredible opportunity and incentive for the urban forest community to learn the best ways to engage under resourced neighborhoods to plant and care for their urban forests.

CAP-AND-TRADE FUNDS AND DISADVANTAGED COMMUNITIES

In 2012, the Legislature passed Senate Bill 535 (De León) which requires 25% of the State proceeds from the cap-and-trade program go to projects benefiting disadvantaged communities. Ten percent (10%) of the funds must be for projects located within those communities. These percentages are the minimum; the State expects to exceed these requirements.

TOP FIVE PRACTICES FOR WORKING IN DISADVANTAGED COMMUNITIES

1. Listen! Find out the community's needs and desires.
2. Work with local partners who already have relationships within the community.
3. Take away barriers: translation, transportation, and childcare.
4. Use word of mouth. If you do a good job, people will talk about it. Use that to your advantage.
5. Commit to the long haul or have a clear exit strategy.

in outreach was much more important than he had originally thought. It was with these encounters in mind that Urban ReLeaf began integrating cultural events into their plantings. For example, recently when working in a predominantly Latino neighborhood, Urban ReLeaf invited Aztec dancers to perform a blessing on the planting area.

“Neighbors came out of their houses to see what was going on. They were excited that we were improving their neighborhood and being sensitive to their culture. We left that neighborhood with a plan to plant 15 more trees.”

Cultural representation goes beyond the emotional aspects though. Both Urban ReLeaf and TreePeople have their materials, including worksheets at trainings, translated in the language used in the neighborhoods where they're working.

PARTNERSHIPS ARE THE KEY

More than anything success seems to hinge on the partnerships that are created within disadvantaged communities. These partnerships look different for each area where work is being done. In one community, it may be the parents, teachers, and students at a local school. In another community, the most important partnership might be with a local church.

“You're looking for the community leaders,” says Kevin Jefferson. “The cream rises to the top, so if you just ask questions in

because they didn't feel safe there.

FOSTERING RELATIONSHIPS

Creating a sense of safety must be accomplished on an emotional level as well as a physical one. Building trusted relationships may be the most important part of working in disadvantaged communities.

In Oakland, Urban ReLeaf has planted and cared for over 16,000 trees in disadvantaged communities since it was founded in 1998. They have mentored thousands in the proper care and planting of trees.

“Respectful communication with all stakeholders, from homeless to students to home and business owners to politicians, is a necessary component for working in disadvantaged communities,” says Urban ReLeaf's Executive Director and Founder Kemba Shakur.

“Trees solve real-time issues like air pollution, stress, blight, water pollution and heat island effect. In communities struggling with big issues like unemployment, food procurement, and crime, urban forestry and everything it involves can be part of a bigger solution.”

Kevin Jefferson, Urban ReLeaf's Director of Research, says that trees can still be a hard sell despite their many benefits.

When initially visiting Fruitvale, a predominantly Latino neighborhood in Oakland, Kevin had doors shut in his face.

“People refused to talk to me, so I had to go about outreach in a different way,” he says.

He partnered with Unity Council, a community organization that provided social services in the neighborhood. The next time Kevin knocked on doors, he had a Latino volunteer from Unity Council with him. They were well-received throughout the neighborhood and held a community tree planting there soon afterward. He realized then that having a face that reflected the community involved



disproportionately from environmental contamination,” said CalEPA Secretary Matthew Rodriquez.

WORKING WITHIN DISADVANTAGED COMMUNITIES

While the external impetus for working within disadvantaged communities has never been quite as compelling as the \$18 million in current CAL FIRE funding, this kind of work is not a new concept for urban forest nonprofits and community groups.

TreePeople in Los Angeles has been working with disadvantaged communities since the early 2000s. Rachel Malarich, TreePeople's Director of Forestry, has spent the past seven years working in disadvantaged communities.

“It's hard to condense that experience into a simple list of to-dos,” she says. “TreePeople is successful, but still learning and has made missteps along the way, too. It's been a huge investment, but trial and error has led to best practices. You *have* to take time to develop personal relationships, so each area is served differently to get similar results.”

During conversations about a canopy coverage study, TreePeople

“California is demonstrating we can combat climate change, create jobs, provide clean air, clean energy, and help revitalize our most polluted neighborhoods,” said Senate President pro Tempore Kevin de León, who authored SB 535. “As a state, we are making tangible investments to strengthen and protect our most polluted and underserved neighborhoods.”

SB 535 gives California Environmental Protection Agency (CalEPA) responsibility for identifying disadvantaged communities. To inform its decision, CalEPA relied on the California Communities Environmental Health Screening Tool (CalEnviroScreen), a science-based tool that identifies California communities that face the greatest burdens from and vulnerability to multiple sources of pollution.

Developed by CalEPA's Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment, the tool is the result of extensive public review and was designed to assist CalEPA in carrying out its environmental justice mission. CalEnviroScreen ranks all 8,000 census tracts in California so that the higher numbers indicate higher environmental burden and vulnerability.

Recently, CalEnviroScreen has become a very important document for California's urban forestry community. This year, the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) Urban and Community Forestry Grant Program is being funded through the California Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund. Because of statewide goals, current CAL FIRE grant funds must be spent entirely in disadvantaged communities. This change in funding requirements creates challenges, but also many opportunities for growth.

“This is a unique opportunity to improve public health and quality of life for people living in communities that suffer

Cover: At Urban ReLeaf's Earth Day 2013 Celebration, an Aztec dance and blessing accompanied the tree planting.

Inset: Community members are taught the correct way to plant fruit trees during a TreePeople event in Watts.

Opposite: TreePeople volunteers care for a tree at Bunche Middle School in Compton.





Above: A TreePeople volunteer cares for a street tree in North Hollywood.

Bottom right: Urban ReLeaf Founder and Executive Director Kemba Shakur plants a tree at an event to celebrate California Arbor Week.

Bottom left: Urban ReLeaf volunteers plant a tree.

the neighborhoods you want to work in, you'll soon figure out who your best partners will be."

Rachel Malarich echoes this sentiment. By finding the right partners, TreePeople's partnerships form a "circle of mutual admiration." Organizations that have long-term goals within a community have time to build the relationships that urban forestry organizations may not have the capacity to build. An urban forestry organization can provide an instant gratification project that the community organization may not be able to provide. Additionally, ensuring people of color are leaders in your projects, something that's rarely seen in forestry, creates role models for youth and community members.

Rachel says the biggest lesson she's learned during her years of working in disadvantaged communities, though, is to listen.

"Communities will tell you

what they need. You may not always be able to provide it, but you can refer them to people and organizations that can. We've earned respect and trust by being honest about when we have limited capacity and when we're able to help."

GARNERING FUNDING WHEN WORK TAKES TIME

Overall, properly working in disadvantaged communities is not quick work. In a world where many projects are funded through timed grant cycles, this can make work in disadvantaged communities even harder.

Rachel suggests applying for grant funding in communities where you have the strongest relationships. For her, this means that the municipalities answer your phone calls, community groups are responsive, and other groups see the work you're doing in the area and want to know how they can make the same thing happen in their communities.

Working in disadvantaged communities is an investment in personal relationships. Make sure your funders know that this is time-intensive work so that they have realistic expectations of what can be accomplished.

Most importantly, be certain you're

having a real and open conversation with the communities you're working with. Commit to the long haul or have a clear exit strategy. Spending time to build relationships in disadvantaged communities only to leave at the end of a grant cycle can feel abrupt if you haven't let everyone know from the start how long your organization is able to work there. Work should be done with an ultimate goal of stewardship by the community.

"Whether it be with elected officials, local partners or community members, it is about taking time to listen, get to know them, hear where they are and what they care about, be available to them and bring resources to places where they already are and be realistic in your expectations and clear about what you do and don't do," Rachel says.

Ashley Mastin is the Network & Communication Manager at California ReLeaf.



FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Welcome to the new *California Trees!* This shorter, snappier, and more colorful newsletter is completely in keeping with the fast-paced action happening in California's urban forests. We hope you'll find that receiving the newsletter in its new format quarterly keeps you better informed of what's happening in the urban forest world.

As many of you know, the State of California is providing greenhouse gas reduction funding of almost \$18 million for urban forest projects this year - funding which will potentially continue in future years. California ReLeaf played an integral role in highlighting to decision makers the value of urban trees for carbon sequestration as well as their important co-benefits to communities.

California ReLeaf devoted a lot of time and energy to forming partnerships with environmental justice coalitions, which were essential to paving the way for the new funding. In 2015, we will continue speaking for trees and advocating consistent, ongoing funding for the urban forest.

This year the funding through CAL FIRE is exclusively allocated to serve disadvantaged communities. This is an amazing opportunity to transform under-resourced urban communities by engaging residents and providing healthier, greener neighborhoods.

If ongoing funding is secured, it is also a great chance to study the various effects and impacts of massive, long-term tree planting and education on California's urban population and environment – a huge Petri dish ripe with opportunities for new research to support what we all know: trees are critical and incredibly important to human health and well-being.

California ReLeaf has applied for grants from CAL FIRE to providing smaller pass-through grants. **In addition to grants for our Network members who prefer smaller grants, we will focus on supporting and encouraging new groups within disadvantaged communities who wish to nurture healthier neighborhoods with tree planting and tree care activities.** If you know of any groups that might be interested, please let us know.

As always, this important work can't be done without you! **Please support California ReLeaf with an end-of-year gift of \$10 or \$10,000 – or any amount in between that you feel comfortable giving.** No matter how much you give, you'll feel good knowing that you're helping make our communities healthier, cooler, and more resilient to climate change.

Wishing you a happy holiday season and a fruitful 2015!





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California Trees

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