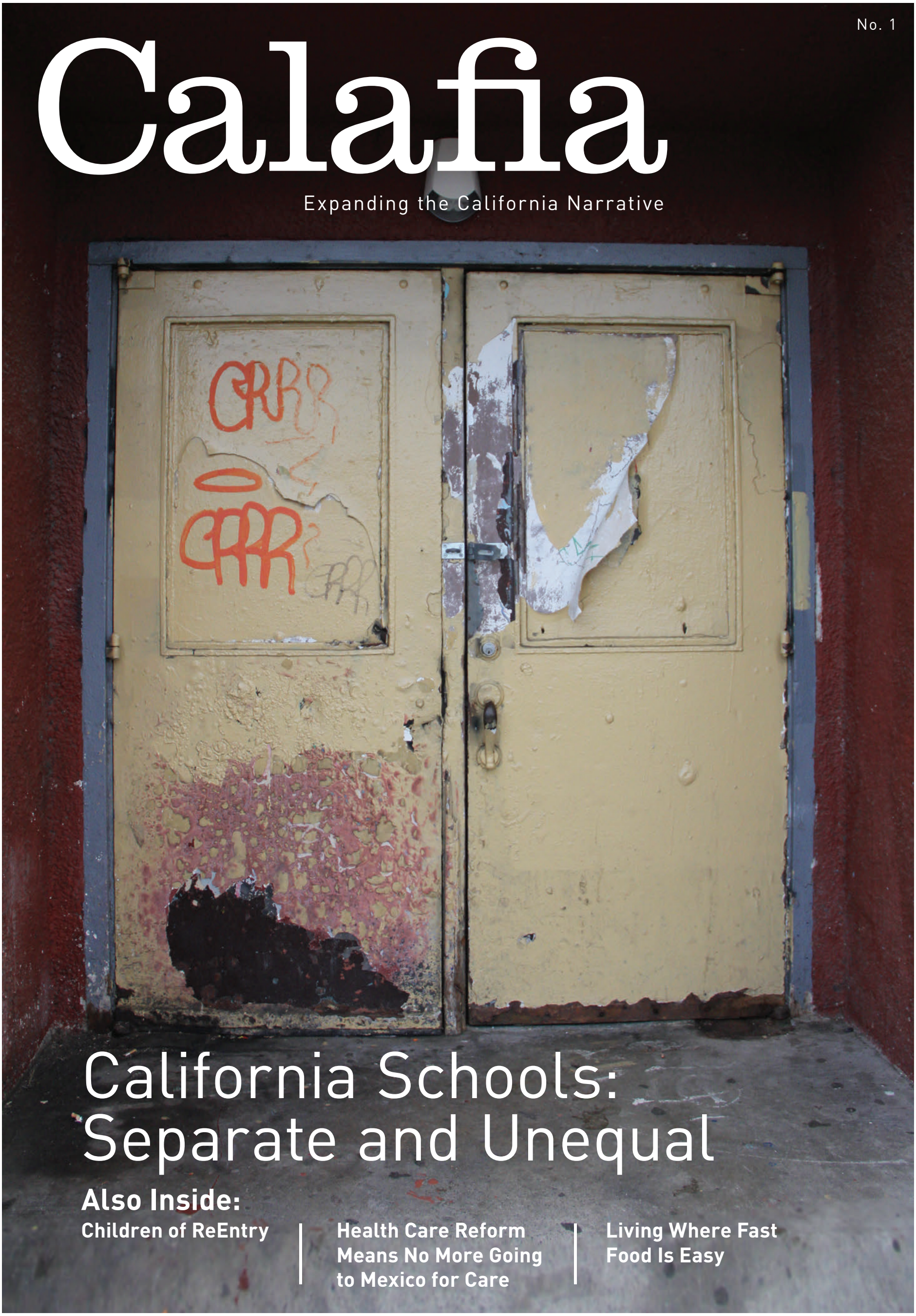
No. 1

Calafia

Expanding the California Narrative



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Calafia

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health happens here
With Prevention

Expanding the Narrative Through Youth-Led Community Media

Three years ago, New America Media set about the task of realizing an ambitious vision: to establish a network of youth-led, community media platforms in areas of California that some have called "media deserts" — swaths of the state without accessible, locally-based media platforms of their own.

Surveying the landscape, we saw that Richmond, a city where Latinos and African Americans comprise a majority, was without a bilingual newspaper for residents. We saw that the voices of farm workers in the eastern Coachella Valley – our nation's fifth largest supplier of agricultural goods – were routinely missing from the regional, Palm Springs-centric news coverage being produced just up Highway 10. We looked and saw no publication that was amplifying the perspectives and opinions of young Californians living in and around Merced; no platform where youth living in the unincorporated communities south of Bakersfield – many of them the children of immigrants -- could tell the stories of their families, neighbors and peers; no platform for youth-led community news in Long Beach, our state's most ethnically diverse city.

Now, thanks to a dedicated group of editors, young content producers, community partners and financial backers who believed in our vision, New America Media has made those things a reality: YouthWire.org exists today as California's first statewide network of youth-led community media outlets, united in the idea that a more inclusive media sector is vital to having a more democratic and just society.

The publication you hold in your hand, *Calafia*, is the first print edition to feature the work of YouthWire as a collective. As much as it is a showcase of the "best of" our statewide work from the last year, it is also a foreshadowing of the issues that are sure to be on the minds of California's young people and their fellow community members in 2014.

Our stories, while produced almost entirely (but not exclusively) by young people, contain community voices from across the demographic spectrum: From elders who have dedicated themselves to urban farming in Richmond's troubled Iron Triangle, to African American parents advocating on behalf of their schoolchildren in L.A., to Vietnam veterans in Bakersfield helping younger vets survive their PTSD, to a mother in San Jose who learned how to raise her kids after years of incarceration and is now helping others with their reentry, to a community worker's ode to young men in Richmond who are playing a key role in reducing that city's violent crime, to a teen mother's struggle in Fresno to eat healthy foods – the stories collected in *Calafia* put a human face on some of the biggest public health and policy issues confronting our state.

Calafia is the queen who ruled over a mystic land called California, in an early 16th century work of Spanish fiction. It is thought that the novel inspired the name of our state. In a literary sense, it also provided California with its first narrative, one that has been evolving ever since. By fostering youth-led community journalism, we can help ensure that the California narrative evolves in a direction that is ever more expansive, and inclusive.

Jacob Simas
Editor

UNiTE Coachella
Incorporating the voices of the eastern Coachella Valley
coachellaunincorporated.org

The kNOw Youth Media
Fresno's Youth Voice
theknowfresno.org

Richmond Pulse
richmondpulse.org

South Kern Sol
La Luz del Valle
southkernsol.org

Voicewaves
Stories for a Healthy Long Beach
voicewaves.org

WECED
youth media
wecedyouth.org

Giving Up the Gun

Ed. Note: In the debate around gun violence, perhaps no one group is impacted more than youth and young adults. Last year, YouthWire reporters from across the state spoke with their peers about how they experience gun violence in their neighborhoods. Those conversations conveyed clear gender and regional differences in the ways young people experience and think about guns, yet point to an emerging consensus that youth want to see their peers give up the gun; that far from making them feel safer, guns are a root cause of the growing climate of fear and insecurity they feel at their schools and on the streets. The two commentaries appearing here offer perspectives from Bay Area young women, on why men are the most likely to perpetrate, and be victims of, gun violence. The accompanying sidebar is a collection of youth voices from Merced, Calif.

"Young Men With Guns Don't Value My Life"

Alicia Marie, San Francisco

I wasn't raised around guns, period. My experience with guns is limited to the fact that they took the lives of my favorite entertainers -- first the singer Selena, who I absolutely adored and wanted to be just like when I got older; later on it was my first crush, Tupac Shakur. So the viewpoint I've held consistently ever since I was a child is that guns are evil.

When the boys I was with had guns, they would tell me, "Don't worry, I got my backup in case things go bad." My own brother once told me, "415… 4 every 1 of mine, we taking 5 of theirs." That type of talk didn't appeal to me or make me feel safe -- it actually made me feel that the person saying those words was ignorant and didn't value their own life.

So what would make me think they are going to value mine?

Boys carry guns because they feel they cannot defend themselves on their own strength alone. They believe that since "everyone else has them, I need one too." But why even put yourself in a situation of needing to constantly be on the defensive, feeling like at any moment someone might attack you? If that's the case, you need to watch who you're associating with.

When I get off of work, which is usually around 11pm at night, I have to walk through the violent streets of the Bayview neighborhood in San Francisco. Every time a car goes by, I'm thinking, "That car could mistake me for someone else and shoot me." By the time I run home it's midnight, and I'm exhausted from my thoughts. But I don't feel the solution is to go get a gun or be with a boy who has a gun, to get home safe. It's not that I think girls are incapable of learning how to use guns. I would just hope that we wouldn't want to use them -- guns have a purpose, and the main one is to take lives or hurt someone. I'd rather take my chances at being safe by not carrying a weapon, but knowing that I won't unnecessarily or accidentally take away somebody else's precious life.

We have to realize that people in our community have grown accustomed to using guns to settle matters.

As young women, we can play a role in getting men in our community to give up their guns. We have a way of talking and reasoning to make a point, and if we were to explain to our brothers, boyfriends, cousins, uncles, and fathers the benefits of giving up their guns, and help them to do it, we could help curb these senseless murders.

And the point we need to make is this: We have to realize that people in our community have grown accustomed to using guns to settle matters. For example, if you have a headache, the first thing you're going to want to do is take an aspirin -- it just comes natural. Likewise, guns have become the natural way to defend and settle matters in the streets; the understood way of responding to anger. So, we can make these crimes less frequent by giving the community alternative ways to deal with anger. And in doing so, we can make people who carry guns around seem ignorant and old-fashioned. We can make the alternative the new normal.

"Young Men Need Guns to Feel Safer, But They're Not"

Keyannie Norford, Richmond

Click, clack, boom! There are a lot of things going on in today's society, where it seems that guns are a necessity for living day to day, especially in the 'hoods of Richmond, California, where turf wars, robberies -- even a case of mistaken identity -- can bring you face to face with a gun. But do guns really provide safety? As a girl, I can say I do not believe they make women feel safer. I believe guns are accidents waiting to happen, and they pose a threat like no other.

There are not many women I know of, other than those in law enforcement, that are actually trained to use a gun. Women are capable of learning, but it's all about the will of the individual. She has to want to know how to use it. Whether for protection, survival or any other reason, when it comes down to it, it's an individual choice. Women who own a gun may say, "Well, it's for protection and if a situation erupts where I need protection, then it will be done."

In the situations that I've seen, though, they didn't actually use it. They just took it out or held it up to scare the other person. I have seen situations in which young women were nervous to handle a gun. They will be sweating; their hands will be trembling, their fingers twitchy.

Now when it comes to men and boys, guns get justified in many ways. Guns play a part in a man's status, even though they may have never really handled one. Having a gun seems to be the "cool" and "modern" thing, especially here in Richmond. In reality, most males, young and old, possess guns for protection. I do know someone who protected himself and someone else because he carried. Males are fighting each other everyday over turfs, colors and gang signs, which means they have to protect the ones they care about, as well as themselves. It's almost as if carrying a gun has become a necessity in these boy's eyes -- some type of unrevealed phobia.

For example, if they didn't carry a gun, then they'd be afraid and paranoid about everything happening around them, thinking, "If today was the day someone decided to come after me, I'd be defenseless, and that could possibly cost me my life." For young men, having a gun is the only way to protect themselves in this horrid generation, and it adds to their manhood. They simply need guns to stay on their "Boss Status," for protection or just to prove a point. Living in the communities we're subject to now-a-days, it's survival of the fittest. There's violence everyday and only the protected live, which is sad, but it happens to be young man's reality.

I do believe that women can try to influence young men to give up guns and with that, possibly save

them from a life of uncertainty. But in today's society it's just not going to work. The rate of violence is too high among men living the "thug-life " for them to feel safe without their form of protection. But in the end, boys and men have to want to walk away from the violence as much as a young woman wants to play a role in stopping it before it possibly starts -- which goes to the choice of carrying a gun. I'm not sure exactly how we can get to a community with fewer guns, but I feel that as soon as young people and men see and feel that there is no reason to be afraid and carry weapons, then there will be fewer guns because there will be no need.

In Merced, Gun Culture 'Heavy'

Alyssa, 19: Growing up, I usually had a relative that was on probation or parole living with us, so that allowed law enforcement to search and seize our house without a warrant. Living in a home where house raids were common, my first experiences with guns began at a young age. My two older brothers are also gang affiliated, so having guns in the house or talk of where to get them wasn't uncommon.

Kalvin, 17: When I was little, the cops shot at my grandma's house because of my dad and my uncle. It was like a shoot out. Another time, when I was a baby, a rival gang member shot at my house and a bullet [hit my dad] in the eye -- thank God he's still living! I don't care how, but we need to stop gun violence.

Austin, 18: I live in a neighborhood that was [recently designated] Section 8. Last year, a student from Merced High School was murdered in my neighborhood in a shooting. Now with dangers like this, it is necessary for people to get protection legally. This is one of the reasons I plan to own a gun legally when I come of age.

Ana, 16: Nowadays, the only guns I'm aware of are my uncle's. He gets them pretty easy. He also takes my 11-year-old cousin to the gun range with him. I don't think she should be allowed there. Besides all that, I believe that here in Merced guns are heavy with all the gang violence.

Lisa, 16: I constantly hear gunshots and at school classmates brag about them! One day I was lying down at home when all of a sudden I heard what sounded like wooden planks falling onto each other. My mom and I investigated the house for a bit, then we heard sirens outside. Apparently, someone was shooting at a person standing in front of our house and they missed. What if that bullet went through or shot my cat!

Young Men Deserve Credit for Steep Declines in Violence

OP-ED • DeVone Boggan

Richmond, CA has experienced another consecutive year of historic declines in violence. The City marked its lowest homicide rate in 33 years in 2013.

While we should celebrate this milestone with great exuberance, the media coverage about this success has been shortsighted. The police officers in Richmond certainly deserve recognition, but so do the young men who have decided to stop the violence.

When one truly desires to live, better decisions are made, lives are changed, and conditions are created that help to transform a city.

Each day in Richmond, boys and men of color between the ages of 13-25 (sometimes younger, sometimes older) face significant challenges including that of negotiating conflicts that have traditionally led to vicious cycles of gun violence. For example, such disputes produced more than 160 deaths here between 2006-2009.

In late 2007 the City of Richmond created the Office of Neighborhood Safety (ONS). The ONS is a non-law enforcement city agency with the charge of reducing firearm assaults and associated deaths. In 2013, the city recorded the lowest number of firearm assaults and homicides in more than three decades, and has experienced a 66% reduction in such crime between the ONS launch and 2013.

Although street level conflicts (disputes that may result in retaliatory cycles of gun violence) are ongoing, and several were certainly navigated by our city's most vulnerable young men in 2013, their responses to these transgressions were far different than in past years.

In mid-2010, the ONS launched the Operation Peacemaker Fellowship, known nationally as "the Richmond Model." As it is called by its local users, "the Fellowship" is an 18-month intensive transformative mentoring program that is responsive to and customized for those identified to be the most likely perpetrators and/or victims of firearm assaults in Richmond. Since 2010, there have been three Fellowship cohorts and as a result 68 boys and young men of color have agreed to participate. The results of this robust engagement have been dramatic and promising.

Of the 68 Fellows over the past 43 month period: 65 are alive (95%); 64 have not been injured by firearm (94%); and 57 are not in custody (84%). The Fellowship, and its Fellows, have contributed to a 50% reduction in firearm related homicides in Richmond compared to the four years before the Fellowship was implemented.

It is essential to communicate the impact of strong partnerships between a caring community and those who have the greatest influence over the direction in which gun violence trends. Without such a relationship, courage, willingness, and the patience required to empower these specific young men – very little changes, and epidemic rates of gun violence persists.

We have made a commitment to acknowledge and affirm the value, worth and humanity of these young men. As such, Richmond must continue to advance positive investments towards the hope that is dependent upon this specific group of individuals. Only then is real and longstanding "peace in our streets" possible.

There is still much work to do. No codes have been cracked and we should not be satisfied until gun violence ends in Richmond. For the families that have lost loved ones this year and in years past, you and the memory of those who have passed on have encouraged a firm resolve and an ongoing commitment to make our city a healthier place to live, work and play.

The ONS and I are truly grateful to the many young men who when faced with potentially lethal contention, made healthier decisions. We are proud of your hard work, your strength and resolve to resist years of bad information, advice, example and instruction that point you toward a path known to escalate conflicts. You are our city's greatest resources and advocates for creating a healthy Richmond. For this we celebrate you.

So with great humility, a strong sense of pride and a heart filled with hope, I thank you!

DeVone Boggan serves as Neighborhood Safety Director and Director of the Office of Neighborhood Safety in Richmond, California

Sealing Youth Offender Records Brings 'Chance at New Life'

Ed. Note: Effective January 1, 2014, probation departments and juvenile courts are required to inform youth offenders of how to seal their criminal records upon turning 18. The author of this commentary, David Cunningham, 23, was among the advocates who testified before a hearing of the Senate Public Safety Committee in Sacramento last June, in support of AB 1006. He is also a contributor to New America Media and a member of the California Council on Youth Relations, a NAM project that brings youth voices to policy discussions in the state capitol.

Commentary by David Cunningham

Joy riding, staying out past curfew, drinking in public — to me it was all just harmless fun. But to civil society it was breaking the law, and I paid the price. After 13 months of serving time in juvenile hall, paying off restitution fees, and doing community service, I thought I was in the clear. I soon found out that wasn't the case.

I was tired of dealing with the system. I was ready to change my life. I tried applying for part time jobs at Subway, Radio Shack, McDonalds, Jack in the Box, Century 21, and a few other places. But after 30 days of checking the "I have a criminal record" box on job applications, I still hadn't been called back for any job interviews. I was ready to give up.

Even though I'd legally paid my debt to society, my criminal record condemned me to a life of continuing to pay for the mistakes of my youth, over and over again.

Most job applications require applicants complete a criminal background check.

I realized that even though I'd legally paid my debt to society, my criminal record condemned me to a life of continuing to pay for the mistakes of my youth, over and over again.

And then a friend told me I could seal my juvenile criminal record. I barely believed him, because no probation officer or judge ever told me I could have a fresh start. I reached out to a community organization in San Francisco to see if he was right, and it turns out he was. A caseworker helped me submit my paperwork to get my records sealed.

Being given a clean slate felt great. I ended up landing a few jobs. I worked for the Department of Public Works and Brothers Against Guns, an organization that works to reduce violence. Having those jobs taught me the importance of taking advantage of good opportunities, and just cherishing what you have. I'm grateful to that case manager and to other community-based organizations that look out for kids in trouble.

But many youth aren't lucky enough to find the support of local community-based organizations. And many more aren't even aware of their rights or the services that are available to help them.

Young people coming out of juvenile detention into today's job market need more than just a pat on the back and a friendly "good luck finding help." Every youth should have the opportunity to go into a job interview feeling like they have a fair chance, like I eventually did.

When I found out that there is a state bill, AB 1006, that would require probation officers and courts to provide information to juvenile offenders about how to seal their criminal record, I went to Sacramento to show my support.

The California Senate Public Safety Committee is one of two key committees where all the crime bills are voted on. When state assembly member Mariko Yamada, the author of AB 1006, motioned for me to join her up at the podium, I went up and testified to the room full of people dressed in business attire why I believed young offenders should be informed about their right to start over with a clean slate by sealing their juvenile records.

I shared with them things I'd learned from my own personal experience: that feeling defeated, before you even apply for a job, is what can cause a person to go crazy. It's enough for some youth to lose all hope of finding a job, and they will resort back to what they know best -- a life of crime to pay the bills.

I was fortunate enough to have a support group and a mentor to guide me in the right direction. But we can't assume that all of California's youth will be helped by community organizations. We need probation officers in every county to give youthful offenders the information they need to seal their records so they can find work.

When I finished my testimony, I asked the politicians to vote in favor of AB 1006. Some seemed to not care -- when I spoke, it seemed like they wanted to be somewhere else, and they voted "no" when the time came, without hesitation. Others, however, expressed some concern for the issue being raised, and ultimately the bill did receive enough "yes" votes to pass the Senate Public Safety Committee.

But state politicians still have two chances to vote the bill down, and I'm going to do whatever I can to make sure they know how important this issue is. Because sealing juvenile records not only means getting a fair shot at employment, it means giving young people like myself a chance at a new life.

Selling Weed to Get By, and Get an Education

By Donny Lumpkins

Patty, a tall, thin 16 year-old dressed in ripped blue jeans and an oversized sweatshirt, was recently kicked out of her parent's home. The high school sophomore couch surfs and rides her skateboard to school everyday.

To pay for food and other essentials, she sells weed.

"It's really hard to get a job at this age," she says. "Most people want prior job experience, but we don't have it because we're so young."

Young people ages 16-19 make up some 34 percent of California's unemployed, the highest level of youth unemployment in the nation.

Sometimes trading bags of marijuana for a night on a couch, Patty notes that so far she's able to separate her studies from her livelihood. "My education is definitely more important to me than making money and selling pot."

Still, she says she hopes to one day use her college degree to become a licensed independent grower.

The weed economy is indeed a lucrative one. Long the United State's number one cash crop, estimates put marijuana sales somewhere in the vicinity of $38 billion annually. In San Francisco, a pound sells for roughly $2,500, though if shipped across the country the price jumps to between $4,000 and $10,000.

Even those whose job it is to connect dealer and buyer or to transport the goods can earn upwards of $100 per transaction. Trimmers who work the fields get $200 a day without even breaking a sweat.

It's that kind of fast money – far more than what you can earn at a minimum wage job -- that's attracting a growing number of generation Y and Z'ers to the weed game. Most say they're not looking to build a Scarface-like empire, but are simply trying to put some cash in their pockets, whether for school, life or play.

The dangers, however, are real.

Dizzy, who didn't want his real name used because of a pending case against him, didn't have many friends before he started selling weed. But the 20-year-old says that all changed when people found out he was dealing.

"A lot of the times I wouldn't do it for profit," he recalls, "but for the homies."

Weed was his ticket to the in crowd, but over time he picked up some habits of his own, and it soon became a way to purchase harder drugs. His need for money grew and it got harder to hang out with friends without having to carry a supply of drugs.

"Eventually all of your friends expect you to be like this. They won't call you unless you're trying to party and use drugs… it's hard to go against people's image of you."

Dizzy eventually ended up on the streets, where he got picked up on serious possession charges. The experience, he says, has turned him off the game.

Others take a more business-like attitude.

Juan, 23, is a student at City College of San Francisco. His family moved here from Mexico, though he was born and raised in the city and, like Patty, lives apart from his parents.

Covering rent and tuition out of his own pocket, he says he "hustles all month" in order to make ends meet, including selling his artwork and doing odd construction jobs. Marijuana, though, is his main source of revenue.

"I've learned a lot about people," he says. And though clearly not the corporate type, he's developed some essential business acumen. "It takes a good deal of social skills to get in and sell to people. Everybody is a potential customer."

And to build your base, you have work fast. Competing with other dealers, Juan says he doesn't smoke weed himself because it "lowers his motivation."

Young people ages 16-19 make up some 34 percent of California's unemployed, the highest level of youth unemployment in the nation.

Sitting in class, he sometimes receives texts, which make it hard to focus on school. "If you don't set limits," he says, the game can "consume every waking minute."

Juan began selling weed in high school because, like Patty, he couldn't find work. When he began, he only sold to friends, though now that he's older he worries about the ramifications of getting caught. Operating by word of mouth, he says he tries to stay "under the radar."

Under California law, possession of an ounce or less of marijuana is considered an infraction punishable by a $100 fine for persons without a prior record. Larger amounts are deemed a misdemeanor and punishable by a $500 fine and/or six months in jail. Possession with intent to sell remains a felony charge.

But despite California's relatively lenient stance, tensions between state and federal laws on the sale and cultivation of marijuana remain a hot button issue. In early April, federal authorities raided Oakland-based Oaksterdam University, which offered classes in the cannabis industry. The San Francisco Chronicle reported earlier that the school's future is now in doubt.

That doesn't seem to have deterred Juan, who says his family wanted him to drop out of school and get a full-time job. "But that would mean giving up my dream of becoming an artist," he said. Ferrying weed by bike to all corners of the city, he says he hopes to one day earn enough from his art to get by.

For now, though, he says he takes each day one delivery at a time.

Children of ReEntry

Editor's Note: Youth reporters from New America Media and Silicon Valley DeBug produced a multimedia series telling the stories of parents returning home from incarceration, through the eyes of their children. The reporters used video and photography to profile impacted families in their local communities and presented their work at two forums, for an audience of stakeholders and advocates who are looking to adopt "family-centric" strategies to reduce prison recidivism, in the wake of Governor Jerry Brown's recently implemented prison realignment policy, AB 109. A final forum and screening, sponsored by State Senator Mark Leno, will be held in the State Capitol in early 2014.

"I Can't Just Be Done With My Mom" by David Meza

When Alisha's drug-addicted mom was preparing for her release from state prison, she asked her daughter Alisha to be her caretaker. Alisha said "no." Alisha spent the first nine years of her mother's incarceration, release, and re-incarceration cycle as a child, and as she enters into her own adulthood, she is finding her mom's absence and chaotic lifestyle an even more bitter pill to swallow.

"I Want to Be Like Him When I Grow Up" by Daniel Zapian

Greg was just released after a being incarcerated most of his life. To his great surprise, his son has taken him under his wing, looking after him while his other sons won't even talk with him. Greg is so grateful for his son's support, he says, "I want to be like him when I grow up."

"Baby Quintero" by Valerie Klinker

The one thing that Suzie couldn't handle while in prison was not being able to protect her daughter, Baby. Baby spent 2 months in juvenile hall while her mom was incarcerated. But now that her mom has returned home with a new job and a newfound sense of self-worth, Baby considers herself her mom's backbone.

"Life Lost, Family Found" by Anthony May

Ever since Nate's dad left his family when he was 8 years old, Nate has never fully recovered. Nate went on to join a gang and spent 20 years in state prison for a murder charge. But after his first year behind bars, something special happened in his life. He had a baby girl. Now that Nate's been released, he is piecing together the relationship with his daughter that for 20 years has been limited to letters, and a few visits to the state penitentiary.

Scan the QR codes with your smart phone's QR code reader to view the videos, or visit: newamericamedia.org/special/children-of-reentry

“A Reentry to Motherhood” by Jean Melesaine

Steeda is finding life with her two young girls to be not exactly what she had envisioned from behind bars. Transitioning from prison life to the responsibilities of motherhood is a struggle that Stacy faces daily -- but she doesn’t do it alone. Steeda stands with other mothers in similar situations through the organization she founded, Sisters That Been There, which is a peer support group for women reentering society after incarceration.

“Joey visits Lisa” by Jean Melesaine

Joey, hadn’t seen her mother Lisa since she was incarcerated 18 years ago. Joey and Lisa’s attorney make the drive to visit Lisa for the first time in 20 years, causing everyone in the car to reflect on their relationship to Lisa, even the attorney.

“Can They Ever Get Along?” by Sean Shavers

Joshua Davis, was four years old when his father Kenny was sent to prison. But instead of returning to the blissful times of Joshua’s childhood when his father came home five years later, Joshua and his father began to resent each other. Today it has been nine years since Kenny’s release and Joshua has lost interest in his father and building a relationship with him. But despite the distance between Joshua and Kenny in their relationship, they actually live on the same block, seeing each other only on holidays and at the local corner store.

“Angela Birts” by Fernando Perez

Angela says she has a positive relationship with her father, despite the fact that for 18 years he’s been behind bars. The physical barrier erected between Angela and her father has become even more painful as her life presents more and more opportunities that she wants to enjoy with her father there. As she prepares for a potential new life with her dad, she realizes that she too will need help with the transition.

Living Where Fast Food Is Easy

Editor's Note: Getting fresh produce is a challenge in many of California's farmworker communities, and so is changing young people's eating habits. Jane Carretero, the daughter of farmworkers in Fresno, shared a bit of her own recent experience in a radio and text diary she produced as a member of The Know Youth Media, a project of New America Media, in collaboration with KQED and The California Report's Hunger in the Valley of Plenty series.

To hear the audio, scan this QR code with your smart phone's bar code reader

Pictured above is 15-year-old Jane Carretero, who lives in Fresno with her farmworker parents.

Commentary by Jane Carretero

Aug. 16, 2013

My name's Jane Carretero. I turned 15 years old on August 12th.

Everything's OK, or as OK as it can be, as a 15-year-old that's pregnant.

Since I got pregnant, my doctor and mom have really been trying to get me to eat vegetables, but I can usually get away with not eating any vegetables or fruit. Whenever I pass by McDonald's I usually end up getting something, which I eat instead of the food my mom makes. She gets really mad because she tells us it's not healthy. My doctor tells me the same thing. It's not healthy for me or the baby.

I do care about being healthy, but it's just to a point where if I really want a certain food I'm not going to think about it being healthy or not. I hardly ever eat any real food. I see that I should be healthy, but if I really want something I'm going to eat it.

The things in my fridge right now? We have milk, tortillas, eggs, and the tapatio sauce that you'd find in every Mexican household fridge. We also have a corner in our refrigerator filled with packets from fast food restaurants: ketchup and hot sauce. It's all from McDonald's, Jack in the Box, Panda Express and Carl's Jr.

The last week of my pregnancy, I ate a lot of takeout and fast food. I had McDonald's breakfasts two days in a row. I didn't mind it. It was food.

Sept. 5, 2013

My mom is a traditional Mexican mom. She's the kind of mom who likes listening to old-school Mexican music while she cooks. She's hardly ever home, but when she is she likes listening to old-school music and cooking.

She makes posole, menudo and tamales, all traditional Mexican dishes. I love it when my mom makes birria — the whole house smells like it and makes it feel like home.

But I usually end up eating hot Cheetos or slushies instead of the food my mom makes.

She is the only parent I really have left. She does everything she can to support us and feed me and my two older sisters. She usually works in the grape fields or picking string beans. She works even though it's 100 degrees outside and she's in the hot sun.

My dad passed away when I was in third grade. He had leukemia and lymphoma. He was the greatest dad ever. Even while he was doing chemotherapy, he was still working in the fields, and trying hard to support me and my family.

At one point, my dad was really sick and weak, and he couldn't go to work. That's when we had to go to the food bank. We didn't have any money or food. We were only able to get hamburger buns and jam, that was what we ate for a whole week before we went back to the food bank. At one point my mom gave us her food because she didn't want to see us not having anything to eat. We learned even though fruit grows on trees, food doesn't come free.

I live in an apartment in the west side of Fresno. People say it's horrible. There are drug dealers and drive-by shootings sometimes. There are people that do drugs around. But as long as you stay clear from them, they don't bother you. My apartment is surrounded by fencing, so I feel safe at night.

My mom and stepdad get one room and my two older sisters get another room. That leaves me with no room. I sleep in the living room with an air mattress next to the sofa. It's not the greatest thing, but I'd rather be sleeping on an air mattress than on the floor.

I used to be the black sheep of the family. I would sneak out easily since I was right next to the door, and no one could tell I was leaving.

Sept. 25, 2013

The last week of my pregnancy, I ate a lot of takeout and fast food. I had McDonald's breakfasts two days in a row. I didn't mind it. It was food.

My baby boy was born on September 11, 2013. It's crazy how you look at the baby that was in you, and now you're holding him in your arms and you think, 'wow, you were in me for the past nine months.' On the day he was born, I found out about a new kind of love.

Now that I have the baby, I have to watch my diet, because I really want to go back to my original weight.

I've never told anyone my weight before, but I'm going to tell you now. By the end of my pregnancy, I was at 200 lbs. When I found out about my weight, I started crying. Now I need to start watching what I eat and stay away from McDonald's or junk food.

Troubled Neighborhood Finds Comfort in Growing Own Food

Annette Smith and Leonard Tally enjoy some afternoon sun in the garden.

William H Fraker / Richmond Pulse

In the neighborhood known as the Iron Triangle, comfort and serenity can be found at the corner of 6th and MacDonald, where a once-barren lot is now host to chickens, rabbits, beehives, and dozens of blossoming garden beds. In and amongst this thriving hub of life, a burgeoning community has taken root and found peace.

"I definitely feel like it's a privilege to grow your own food," shares Lena Henderson, founder and director of The Garden of Comfort and Serenity and daughter of lifelong Richmond activist Lillie Mae Jones. "It keeps you grounded," says Henderson. "It's a nurturing environment."

But it hasn't always been this way. A few years ago, the roughly 2-acre plot of land was nothing but an abandoned parking lot, where the only things growing were useless weeds and Richmond's crime rate. But in the heart of the Iron Triangle, long reputed as one of Richmond's poorest and most violent neighborhoods, Henderson's vision has proven itself resilient, transforming the vacant land into a powerful resource for community growth.

Like most things in life, The Garden of Comfort and Serenity started as a seed.

"First she had the mulch, and then she had the beds built," explains Annette Howard, who lives adjacent to the garden with three of her daughters and serves as the garden's co-director.

With input from Richmond's Youth Build and Self-Sustaining Communities, a non-profit organization, the hard work and commitment of Henderson and Howard has resulted in not only fresh produce, but changed lives.

"People just show up," Annette explains. "We get all kinds of people that come through and sit down and talk their problems out."

Neighbors come to plant in the boxes; strangers also come, some to sit silently in peace, some to find an open ear and heart; homeless men and women come and receive fresh food; cars pass with a honk; people pass with a smile.

For longtime residents of the Iron Triangle, the change brought by the garden is palpable.

"I was depressed a lot," explains Howard, struggling to hold back tears, "and Lena used to tell me to come out, because I had lost everything. She used to come and get me, put me in the garden and work me to death, make my problems go away, because once you're in the garden, your problems go away."

Her narrative hovers over the soulful tunes of R&B station 102.9fm, resounding through the solar-powered radio that is virtually always on, a signal to passersby that, according to Henderson, says, "welcome to our garden."

"It's really nice and soothing to put your hands in the soil and give all your problems to the dirt," Howard says. There's something profound about turning pain and sadness into beauty and life, a magic reaction that here only the garden seems to accomplish -- a positive alternative to other routes so often taken by Richmonders, those of drugs and violence.

"People just show up. We get all kinds of people that come through and sit down and talk their problems out."

Yet the healing powers of the garden are much more than mental and emotional. By offering nutrition, exercise and relaxation, it has worked miracles for the physical health of those involved in the project. Leonard Tally, a long time friend of Annette, was recovering from heart surgery due to two clogged arteries, when Annette got him to start coming to the garden as a place to relax.

"Instead of just sitting at home, it's more relaxing at the garden," he explains. "[Annette] would give a lot of vegetables and different stuff for me to take home, and made sure I eat healthy." The next time Tally went to the doctor, he was told he had made a marvelous recovery.

"It feels good to know that you grew something," says Lynette, one of Annette's daughters. "That the stuff you planted… changed something."

Rescuing Produce to Feed the Hungry

Aurora Saldivar / Coachella Unincorporated

Inspired by the mass quantities of food Americans throw away, Christy Porter decided to tackle the hunger problem in the Coachella Valley over ten years ago.

"(With) 27 percent field waste and 30 percent plate waste," says Porter, "there is no reason for anyone to be hungry in our country."

Taking matters into her own hands, Porter founded Hidden Harvest in 2001, a non-profit that "rescues" produce from eastern Coachella Valley fields and distributes them to over 60 agencies serving low-income residents throughout the region.

The Coachella Valley, a strip of inland desert in southern California that extends 45 miles from the San Bernardino Mountains of Riverside County to the Salton Sea, is the fifth largest agriculture-producing region in the United States. It is primarily known as a date-producing region – roughly 95 percent of all the nation's dates originate in the Coachella Valley – but residents here are quick to point out that the fertile valley produces nearly every type of vegetable and fruit imaginable.

"Kids can't eat red tape while you're waiting for policy to take effect. People are still hungry."

Photo courtesy Christy Porter, Coachella woman wears bandana as protective gear as she picks grapes in the scorching heat.

Despite the bounty of food grown in the Coachella Valley, however, not even three-quarters of the produce ultimately winds up on people's dinner plates. Produce is regularly left to wither away and die, when a grower determines that the price of harvesting their product outweighs their ability to sell it for a profit.

The image of food literally rotting on the vine is especially ironic in a place like the east Coachella Valley, where poverty and malnutrition are highest in those communities that are home to the very farm workers who harvest the crops.

Porter's fight against hunger took root in one such community, Mecca, where she began by building edible gardens at Saul Martinez Elementary School. She was struck by a question posed to her by a father at the school: Why is so much of the food left to rot in the fields where I work?

"When I came here, we didn't need policy as much as we needed food," she says. "Kids can't eat red tape while you're waiting for policy to take effect. People are still hungry."

Local farmers notify Hidden Harvest when there is product left in the fields that would not make it into grocery stores due to cosmetic blemishes or cost to harvest. The non-profit quickly hires crews to harvest the remaining produce.

"Our biggest problem is not that the produce, it's out there. It's getting the farmers to remember to call us before they plow it up," explains Porter, who believes tax incentives for participating farmers would be helpful. "It is big business for them to hold a crop in the field, even for one day."

"Produce is getting harder and harder to come by," says Porter. "Since 2008, the demand for food in food banks has gone up 60 percent. We were probably serving 20 to 25 thousand people back then, but farmers started selling more and more and more of their products so our access to products went down about 50 percent."

It is a constant struggle for Hidden Harvest to access produce when supply is down, but the need within the community is still prevalent.

"I find it hard to get enough produce to feed the beast," says Porter.

"We haven't had any help from federal or state dollars. It's not that we are opposed to it, it's just we haven't had any. We are kind of small, so we are trying to get money by grants or by public contribution, but that's a lot of work. That's what I do all the time. I'm raising money day and night."

In the quest to end domestic hunger, Hidden Harvest employs about six hundred local farm workers during the course of the year, to go onto farms and harvest the crops that would otherwise be bulldozed or left to rot. The organization feeds, educates, employs, and inspires hope within the community year round, often using Porter's own photography -- she was an accomplished photojournalist in her previous career -- as a catalyst.

"How can you photograph hunger?" asks Porter. "Part of our job is to convince people that it is out there."

Youth Speak Out on Food Stamps Cuts

Editor's Note: In 2009, The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act increased Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits – commonly known as food stamps — by 13.6 percent, as a way to bring relief to struggling Americans during the economic recession. But on November 1 of last year the increase expired, returning SNAP benefits to pre-recession levels. The program cut affects roughly 4 million Californians, many of them young people. Members of We'Ced, a youth media project based in Merced, discussed the importance of food assistance programs in their own lives, and how they foresee the change affecting their families.

Natalie Salas:
My mother is a single parent looking for work and has little to no family. Without SNAP or EBT we would struggle more than we already do. I would probably start trying to find other ways to help support my family, other than working the little odd jobs I do now.

I see people around me who have jobs but still don't make enough to survive. We read an NPR report that says 3.8 million people will be left without food assistance when the SNAP cuts go through. Just think of all those people that may have to resort to drastic measures to support their families.

Alyssa Castro:
When I heard about SNAP being reduced, I immediately thought of my 10-year-old niece, my six-year-old nephew and three-year-old niece. My sister supports a family of five with a minimum wage job and the help of food stamps. She already is required to report her income, and on a good month when she's earned a bit more money, her food stamps are reduced.

Thinking of all the other three-year-olds, working mothers or any of the other 3.8 million people that may be affected, is scary. I feel my sister's family and the people I care about will be greatly affected. I'm not taking into consideration SNAP fraud right now, because I think the amount of fraud is a lot less than the families that truly need it.

Benny Escobedo:
I believe that the government should cut money, just not from essential life programs. People need food stamps; they need the reassurance in their lives that food will not be a problem. The Declaration of Independence states that people have the right to liberty, life and the pursuit of happiness. Needless to say, we cannot live without food. The government sends so many resources to other countries that they say cannot survive on their own, yet seeks to diminish its own people through cutting SNAP benefits. This is not only inhumane, but also sadistic. As a nation already struggling with poverty, we will have to deal with uncurbed hunger. The cuts do not benefit the people of the United States.

Fernando Almaraz:
I agree with the SNAP cuts. In the words of Paul Ryan, "This no longer is a safety net, but rather has become a hammock for people to rely on."

"My sister supports a family of five with a minimum wage job and the help of food stamps."

The opposing argument is that there are people in our country that rely on the SNAP program for food simply because they don't have a job. I am not stating that we should let people starve, but rather set tighter restrictions on who can get it and make the cuts needed. To be realistic, there are people taking advantage of these programs and are living off the taxes of American people. I have personally seen people who have gone to purchase groceries with a cart so full that items on their cart seem like they can fall out at any moment, and all they have to do is slide their EBT card. They even buy meat! To make things even better, they drive off in their Cadillacs or relatively new cars.

Making matters worse, for the people that really need the assistance, the program may not be offered. When my dad had a heart attack and my mom was the only one working, we sought help and were rejected, even though we are low-income. Yet the very next day we see a man selling his SNAP card for cash, only to purchase alcohol. This needs to end!

Lisa Vasquez:
With SNAP benefits reduced, my family may experience more food shortages throughout the month. The stamps we get now barely get us through the month — most of our stamps run out by the second or third week. My mom also receives cash aid on her card and that all goes to rent, which doesn't even cover our rent, let alone our other expenses. My mom has to hustle already to make it through the month and she can't really get a job because of health and mental issues. Less SNAP benefits will be a big strain on not only my family but other American families as well.

Lisbeth Vazquez:
With SNAP benefits being cut, my family will be greatly affected. I live in a home with my two brothers and a single mom. My mom has tried looking for jobs but she has only been able to find part time work. That is not enough even though we have food stamps. If we didn't have food stamps I don't really know what we would do. All I can picture is us going to live with a family member, because we would not earn a living with my mom's part time job.

Ana Llimet:
Most people I know here in Merced get food stamps, including my family. My mom has many health issues and a tumor in her knee. She can't walk or stand for long so it's pretty much impossible for her to get a job, plus she can't read or write. My family depends on food stamps and welfare. Without these benefits, my family would be foodless and possibly homeless. Being in a desperate state brings out a side of people that isn't pretty. I was once homeless and foodless and desperate. That's when stealing and drug dealing came in. With SNAP benefits cut, I believe crime will increase.

Jjakoba Predmore:
My family will be affected by the SNAP cuts. I am the only person in my family that technically "works" and I only make the $120 I bring home every month from We'Ced. My mom's boyfriend's parents pay for everything but food, and I feel like if they had to pay for our food, too, they would just stop helping us altogether. All of the kids in the house would be placed in foster care. I know that sounds a bit extreme but I honestly feel like that could be the end result of our food stamps being cut.

Deborah Juarez:
I don't agree with the SNAP cuts. I know a few of my peers that get food stamps and depend on it. I remember a friend of mine saying, "I need the food stamps; without them I can't eat." She seemed quite grateful to have them, which was weird because most people would be embarrassed about having them. I asked why she was so proud of being on food stamps and she said it was because she "gets to eat, and my mom works hard already paying bills. Food stamps help us get food on the table and gives me lunch to bring to school." This conversation impacted me because she was the only one of my peers that said that out loud and proud, not caring who heard. Food stamps are a way of helping people survive in this economy, so taking it away from people, up to 3.8 million people, will only lead to a lot of people struggling and starving.

Health Care Reform Means No More Going to Mexico for Care

Alejandra Alarcon / Coachella Unincorporated

Like a lot of other families living in the Eastern Coachella Valley, when one of our family members fell sick, it meant driving about a hundred miles across the border into Mexico, to the City of Mexicali, to get taken care of by a doctor. The only other option, it seemed, was not being taken care of at all.

Now, because of healthcare reform efforts in the United States, many young people growing up today in the Eastern Coachella Valley – the unincorporated rural communities of southern Riverside County – don't need to go without health insurance the way I did. The scenario is finally beginning to change. At least, it can change – if people here are made aware of the health services now available to them through federal health care reform, right in their own community.

Photo: The author, Alejandra Alarcon, as a baby with her older sister Gabriela (Gaby) and brother Robert (Rocky), in the family van. Their mother usually made the van comfortable for the long trips to Mexicali.

"We owe it to our country to inform the citizens to take advantage of all these resources that are available," said Ronnie Cho, associate director of public engagement for the White House, during a speech about health care reform that I attended in Washington D.C. as a reporter last April.

Cho is right. For the Affordable Care Act (ACA) to make a difference, people need to first be aware that health care is an option for them. People need to know that they can afford to visit a doctor, without having to stray more than a few miles away from their home.

When my family would go to visit relatives across the border in Mexicali, we always took advantage of the opportunity to stop by the Mexican pharmacy to buy medicine for ourselves, as well as for our friends and neighbors who always requested some.

As a child, I thought those trips to Mexicali to visit the doctor were the only way – it was just what people did -- until later on in my youth, when my father got a job with a new trucking business that gave him medical benefits that included family coverage. Because my dad worked for a lot of different trucking companies during the years, and because there were lengths of time when he was unemployed, our health care situation was never stable. But at least for those few years, my family and I received the best health care we'd ever had.

"Young people are relatively healthy, so they think, 'I don't need health care,' until something happens and they actually need it," said Cho.

Again, Cho got it right. I can remember my worried mother, back in 2008, telling my little sister and me that we once again did not have health insurance and would have to resume our trips to Mexicali. In retrospect, I never minded the long trips to the doctor or dentist's office. In fact, I never worried about my health. My parents always had medicine from Mexicali available in our cabinets for emergencies. For my siblings and me, it was not something that got in the way; it was something that we believed had to be done because there was no cheaper option.

The irony is that even though being uninsured felt normal to me and my siblings growing up, it is families like ours that need that insurance the most. Families like mine that live in the unincorporated communities of the Eastern Coachella Valley – most of us are Latino, many (like my parents) are immigrants, and many make a living as farmworkers or do some other type of physical labor – are especially in need of the protections provided by health insurance, because of occupational hazards and other health risks associated with living in an area where people lack money and resources.

Today, the Affordable Care Act is helping families like mine take control of our medical insurance, by providing options and a sense of security. It's an idea – health care security -- that at one time, at least for my family and I, seemed impossible to imagine. The health insurance that for so long seemed like such a special privilege will now become available to more people than ever before.

The ACA was put into place in part to make sure insurance companies cannot end your coverage plan when you need it the most, cannot bill you into debt, cannot discriminate due to pre-existing medical conditions.

Among other provisions, the ACA will secure medical insurance for American citizens after getting laid off or changing jobs. It will require insurance companies to cover the cost of mammograms and cancer screenings. And for the first time, young adults will remain eligible to be covered under their parent's or guardian's health insurance plan through the age of 26, even if they are married.

If you know where to look, it is free and simple to apply for affordable or no cost medical insurance programs such as Medicaid and the Childrens' Health Insurance Program (CHIP), which cover medical services that include doctor check-ups, emergency care, hospital care, vaccinations, prescription drugs, vision, hearing, and dental.

There was a time, for a lot of us living here in the Eastern Coachella Valley, when driving across the border seemed like the easiest and most affordable way to access health care. Fortunately, for many of us, that no longer needs to be the case. Our communities can have the security of health insurance that for so long seemed just beyond our reach, if we just know where to find it.

Some Dreamers Surprised to Learn They Qualify For Health Care

Viji Sundaram / New America Media

Editor's Note: In 2012, the Obama administration announced a new program for undocumented immigrants who entered the country at age 16 or younger, and who have lived in the United States continuously since 2007. The DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) program allows immigrants to live and work in the country for two-year renewable periods, provided they maintain their student status and serve in the U.S. military, among other requirements.

Unbeknownst to many of the approximately 127,200 California DACA recipients, their families and health care advocates, recipients 21 and under are eligible for exclusively state-funded Medi-Cal, which expanded on Jan. 1, 2014.

New America Media interviewed four DACA students in Sacramento, San Francisco, Long Beach and Oxnard to find out what having health insurance means to them.

Itzel Martinez, 19
The eldest daughter of farmworkers in Oxnard, Calif., Martinez got DACA status about one year ago.

But neither she nor her parents were aware that as a DACA recipient, she could apply for state-funded Medi-Cal. Had they known, it would have spared them three months of stress over not being able to pay the hospital bill.

Recently, Martinez slipped and fell in the kitchen of her family home, and split her lip on the counter. Her mother rushed her to the emergency room of a local hospital. The wound required four stitches, a procedure that took only a couple of hours. The hospital later sent a bill for $1,500.

Unable to pay it, Martinez has been trying unsuccessfully to get the hospital to waive the costs. The hospital threatened last month to send the bill to a collection agency if she doesn't pay up.

"That is why a lot of older immigrant kids won't go to see a doctor when they fall sick, because they are afraid that if they don't pay up their medical bills it will mess up their credit ratings," observed Alicia Reyes of La Hermandad, a youth and family center for immigrants in Oxnard, Calif.

A couple of weeks ago, Martinez applied for state-funded Medi-Cal, after she found out through New America Media that she might be eligible. A social service worker from the Mixteco/Indigena Community Organizing Project helped her to fill out the form.

When she does get Medi-Cal, it will be applied three months retroactively, according to Tanya Broder, a senior staff attorney with the National Immigration Law Center. That means Martinez will not have to face the collection agency.

"It will be such a relief to have health insurance… I won't have to deal with hospital bills," said Martinez, who is currently a student at Oxnard Community College.

Miguel Tiburcio, 17
A Natomas Charter School senior in Sacramento, Miguel Tiburcio got his DACA card earlier this year, but no one told him or his family that he might be eligible for state-funded Medi-Cal.

Next year, the youngster will age out of the Kaiser Children's Health Insurance program offered to kids up to age 18, who do not qualify for public health care insurance programs because of their immigration status or family income. The program has given Tiburcio access to doctors to treat his allergy-induced asthma, which has been bothering him for the last three years.

Tiburcio's father, Angel, lost his driver's job with a construction company last year, and things have been hard for the family ever since. Both Angel and his wife, Maria, are doing everything they can to keep Miguel and his younger sister, Paulina, 15, in school.

Knowing that he might qualify for Medi-Cal is a relief, Miguel Tiburcio said, "especially because I don't know when I will have my next asthma attack."

Tiburcio is planning to go on to college and major in psychology, with a minor in music. The youngster is in his high school's percussion ensemble.

Having DACA, he said, has opened up many opportunities to him. Most importantly, "it will facilitate furthering my education," he said.

Jesus Castro, 18
In the 13 years that Mexico-born DACA recipient Jesus Castro has been in the United States, he has had to use his Healthy Kids San Francisco card only a few times at a local community clinic for minor health issues.

Healthy Kids is a health insurance program created to provide coverage to children who do not qualify for Medi-Cal.

Castro, who is enrolled in City College of San Francisco, learned the importance of having health insurance when he dislocated his shoulder while in kindergarten. The nurse at the hospital his father took him to told the youngster the hospital would need to put his shoulder in a cast. For his dad, that would have meant spending out of pocket.

"So my father took me home and then to a curandero – a traditional healer — who gently manipulated the shoulder joint and set it right," Castro recalled.

The memory of his undocumented and uninsured mother being rushed to a hospital one day a few years ago with a severe nosebleed, and the "stack of bills" that piled up from that visit is also still fresh in his mind, Castro said. As is the memory of his dad falling off a ladder while roofing a two-story building and thankfully ending up with nothing more than a few bruises because a tree branch broke his fall.

"He could have died that day," Castro said.

"If Medi-Cal is available for me, now that I am a DACA recipient, I will definitely enroll in it," he said. "I am healthy now, but God forbid should something happen."

When Adalhi Montes, 21, of Long Beach, Calif., was granted DACA status, nobody bothered to tell him he could also qualify for state-funded Medi-Cal. / Photo courtesy VoiceWaves

Adalhi Montes, 21
Mexico-born Adalhi Montes three years ago started experiencing pain in his leg, first somewhat intermittently, and later constantly.

"I didn't think someone my age would experience so much pain," Montes said. "I thought I would experience pain only in my old age."

The pain became so intense a year ago, "I could barely walk or even stand," he said. Some nights, it kept him awake.

After going from clinic to clinic in and around Long Beach, Calif., and using up all the money his mother had saved for his college, he was finally told that he was suffering from "iliotibial band syndrome," an inflammation of a band of connective tissue that runs from the hip to the shinbone.

When the stretching exercises he was told to do did not help, a doctor suggested a course of cortisone injections, something Montes said he doesn't want to consider because of the possible side effects. Ibuprofen has kept his pain a little under control, he said.

Earlier this year, Montes, a graduate of Millikan High in Long Beach, got DACA status that allowed him to snag a part time job with VoiceWaves, a community media organization in Long Beach.

Come January 1, 2014, he's planning to apply for state-funded Medi-Cal, when it expands to allow single, low-income childless adults like him to enroll.

"It's so important to have insurance because it will allow me to not have to live with the pain that's been a part of my life for so long," Montes said.

What Our School's Need:

Editor's Note: California's recently enacted Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), in effect since July 1, will continue to increase funding for school districts over the next eight years. The greatest increases will go to districts with large populations of "high need" — low-income, foster youth and English Language Learner (ELL) — students. There are concerns, however, over how districts will purpose these new revenue streams, and whether or not communities will be actively engaged – as stipulated under the LCFF – in the process of determining where the greatest needs are. New America Media asked high school students from across the state to weigh in on that question, using photographs and their own words.

"Drinking water contaminated with arsenic"

I am a senior at Golden Valley high school, and I ask for only one simple thing - clean, drinkable water. When we turn on our water fountains to take a drink of water we expect to be drinking clean pure water. However, that is not the case at Golden Valley high school. Recently the students of Golden Valley High School received a letter from the Kern High School District informing them that their drinking water is contaminated with arsenic. Though the community water center claims the levels are not yet high enough to be harmful to people the amount of arsenic detected in the water is still above the legal health standard. Arsenic is a drinking water contaminant that can have serious health effects, such as reduced mental functioning in children, cancer of the bladder, lungs, skin, kidneys, liver and prostate and Type 2 diabetes. As a result of the water contamination, students have now started to refuse to drink from the drinking fountains, and because the school does not provide another source for free water; students are not drinking the recommended amount of water.

— Chris Romo, Golden Valley High School, Kern High School District (KHSD)

"Campus is damaged"

At Richmond High, some of the infrastructure on campus is damaged and in need of repair. While walking near the entrance of school, I discovered a ceiling light cover that was falling out above the main entrance of the little theater of the school. If this cover were to fall out, it could definitely cause damage to a student or faculty member. Damage is also present on building doors, along with some benches. But the thing that affects students the most, is the lack of funding for sports teams and equipment. Most of the basketball courts don't have nets, and if they do have a net, it's in poor condition. A friend of mine on the varsity football team also confirmed that the team "needs better equipment." The lack of funds for sports and recreation activities hurts students, in part because if we decide to apply to universities, one of their requirements is to show participation in extracurricular activities.

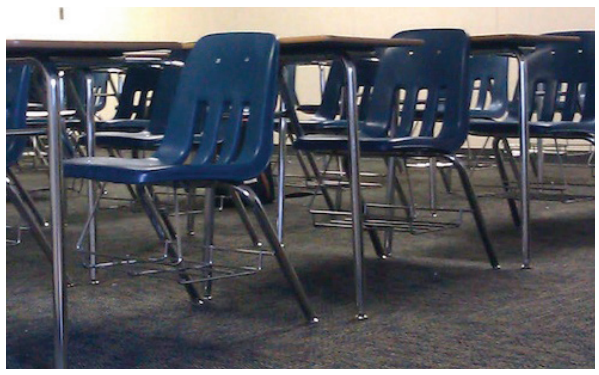
— Luis Cubas, Richmond High, West Contra Costa Unified (WCCUSD)

Restrooms "don't function properly"

I would most like to see a restroom upgrade. There are only two restrooms available for the entire student body of 2,000 students to utilize during our 5-minute break and 38-minute lunch period. There is always a line, partly because the facilities are outdated and inefficient. The restrooms currently are equipped with hand dryers but they don't function properly. They blow out cold air at low pressure, so it takes more than 5-minutes just to wash your hands. Thankfully, this school year, our soap dispensers were upgraded but they never seem to be filled. Also, the doors to the restroom stalls are always unreliable. At any moment it could just fly open due to the opening or closing of a nearby stall. Lastly, the restrooms have no type of air freshening system. Restrooms are supposed to be relaxing and clean, not repulsive and dirty -- a place where students should be able to refresh themselves, and not tiptoe around or avoid altogether.

— Alexis Pigg, Edison High School, Fresno Unified (FUSD)

Needed: "Lockers for our books"



I chose to take this photo because normally one might expect to see a set of textbooks stacked underneath the desks. But at my school, there's usually just an empty space. Since our school is somewhat small, the students don't have lockers, so many students choose not to bring their books at all. With multiple classes, carrying all of your textbooks around can get tiring. Also, without a place to keep them, the books are easily damaged or simply lost, which results in a fine. Lockers for our books or having a classroom set of books would be greatly appreciated!

— Maria Garcia, 15, Olive Crest Academy, Coachella

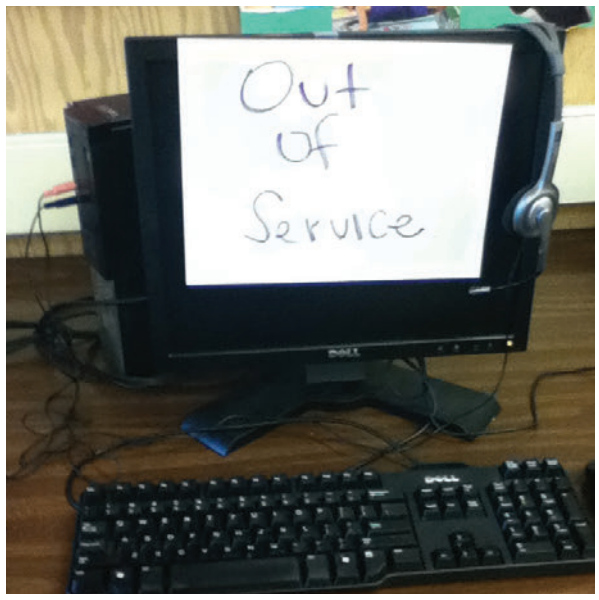
Library books are "old or damaged"

The picture above shows how many books are in our library, and it looks like a lot, but I've noticed that most of the books are either old or damaged. At times, students will want to check out a book but due to its poor quality, the book becomes unavailable. Another problem is the limited variety of books that we have. Being a huge lover of reading, I feel that many of our novels are outdated. There are times when I go in looking for a certain book and am disappointed to not find it there. Most students nowadays aren't fans of reading, but there are still some who enjoy checking out books from the library. A new supply of books could improve student education and perhaps even lead to higher test scores, better papers, and hopefully would encourage students to read more.

— Jocelyn Sanchez, Jordan High School, Long Beach

A Student Eye View

Slow Internet makes computers "not really usable"



My school needs a few new computers. I am a sophomore at Arvin High School and I feel that my school needs improvement in the area of technology. Not only is my school equipped with outdated computers but it is also hard to gain access to them. Most of our computers are so slow that they are not really usable. When we do get a chance to get on a computer, we spend most of our time starting them or resetting passwords. And when we are finally in, it can be hard to navigate the internet because the computer is slow. To use a computer we need permission from a teacher, or we must go as a group with our class. Getting permission from a teacher can be quite hard because they don't want to be liable if anything happens to the computer. Some teachers are nice enough to let us use a computer, but most are not. I feel that the quality of my education and my classmates is being impacted by the lack of access to well equipped computers, because many students don't have access to the internet or a computer at home and may have a hard time completing assignments.

— Ivonne Bruno, 16, Arvin High School and lives in Lamont, California

"More computers" needed to meet student demand

What my school needs is more computers. Some have signs that say, "Out of Service" -- we need maintenance to fix these computers or have them updated with new ones so that students can use them for homework projects. And even the ones we have are not enough for the number of students (approximately 2,300 who come from Arvin, Lamont, Weedpatch and Bakersfield). For example, my English class only has 3 computers and there are about 40 students. During nutrition and lunch the room gets full and it's difficult to get anything done, and it gets even worse during finals. Our library is big but there is little in the way of computers, so it's not a great place to study. Besides the computers, we need more lockers. Our school only provides lockers for certain students, which isn't fair to other students who are trying hard. From my point of view, Arvin High School needs so much to be done.

— Aurora Cervantes, 16, is a student at Arvin High School and lives in Arvin, Calif.

Classrooms "filled to the max"

I know that I am not alone when I ask for more well trained educators to reduce classroom sizes and help students have a better learning environment at Golden Valley High School. Golden Valley High School is located in southeast Bakersfield in a poverty-stricken neighborhood, where more than 70 percent of students receive free or reduced lunch. Even though there are many things that need improvement in my high school, I feel that we need smaller classroom sizes to allow for more one-on-one relationships between teachers and students. As shown in the picture, many if not all classrooms at Golden Valley are filled to the max with about 35-45 students per classroom, which is way over capacity. Much of this is not due to lack of classrooms, but to budget cuts which restrict the hiring of new teachers, causing a shortage of staff that results in too many students being fit into small classrooms.

Food "just isn't appealing"

The lunch menu is terrible! Instead of moving to whole grains and gluten-free, why not add diversity to the menu? Every time I go to lunch, many students refuse to get the standard: one fruit, one vegetable, a milk and an entree. It just isn't appealing. Furthermore, lactose-intolerant students must look elsewhere if they are to eat lunch, no alternative is offered. I once found a cockroach in the tray of oranges in the cafeteria. Lovely. My school has, and knows it has, a cockroach infestation, yet there isn't much they seem to do about it.

~ Maria Hammet, 16, Merced High School

The food in our cafeteria needs to be better. It is either undercooked or overcooked and they serve the exact same thing everyday. There is no variety and that is a huge issue.

~ Deborah Juarez, 17, Merced High School

More resources for "teaching the AP Exam"

At Buhach Colony High School, there is more of a focus on the general class curriculum, and not as much on the AP exam. For this reason the amount of students who earn [a good score] on the AP exam are those who make it their goal to be successful and decide to form study groups, as well as pursue other kinds of outside educational aid. My suggestion would be for schools to better prepare the students by teaching the AP exam, and not simply show them the requirements or the format of the test.

~ Fernando Almaraz, 17, Buhach Colony High School, Merced

For more on LCFF, see EdSource Today's "Essential Guide" at: edsource.org

Lessons of a Former Bully

Diego Sandoval / We'Ced Youth Media

The bullying started as early as I can remember.

I can recall saying to one classmate in kindergarten, "Listen, this is my playground kid," as I held a pointy object to his neck.

Yeah, I was what you would consider a bully. I bullied kids because I was always the big one, the tallest in class and the thickest, too. I had an advantage since all the kids my age were usually smaller and more delicate.

I felt as if I was born to fight. I lived in a house full of drama. It seemed like everyone in my family would talk mess about each other all the time. Sometimes that led to physical violence. I saw my family fight with each other, and was even involved in that violence when I was as young as seven-years-old.

I looked up to my older brother, who sometimes was violent. I wanted to be just like him. In school everyone already knew not to mess with me, as early as second grade. That's when I figured I was "the bomb," or at least that was my mentality back then.

But when I moved to California from Florida in the fourth grade, the tables had turned. I didn't know anyone, so I soon became the quiet kid in class. I became a loner. I became the one who was bullied because I'm Latino, and my English wasn't all that fluent at the time.

Like myself, Kalvin Saelee, didn't immediately realize the impact his behavior could have on others.

"It made me feel bigger and better than everyone else, and I convinced myself (that it was OK) to do it," he said. "I was a very popular guy. I saw it as a joke, but I didn't know the bullets I shot through my words would cause harm."

I also interviewed Myles Houston, who was a victim of bullying, to see what kind of harm it caused him. Myles said he had a hard time relating to his peers.

"I had female characteristics, was overweight, and I wore glasses. Kids didn't like me because I was different. They would say mean things to me and I couldn't say anything back because I felt if I did it would sound stupid, (and) they would just laugh at me," said Myles.

Myles also said he would try to stop the bullying by thinking of ways to improve himself.

"I used to think all the time, 'I need to lose weight, look at all the pimples on my face,'" he recalled.

According to recent reports, almost a third of all students ages 12 to 18 experience being bullied at school, some even on a daily basis. Fourteen percent of those students have a really bad reaction to the bullying and end up developing bad anxiety, poor self-esteem, depression about going to school, and even suicidal thoughts.

While Myles said that he eventually lost weight and the bullying decreased, he still felt anxious.

"I changed my looks, but my insecurities will never go away," said Myles.

Kalvin said he also changed over the years, but his transformation was of a different kind.

"I started to interact with people I used to make fun of and I got to know them. They were actually nice people to talk to. When I found out that some of them would hurt themselves because of bullying, I felt like I was a horrible person," he said.

One victim, Heaven Murillo, had to get her mother involved. Heaven said it all started when a former classmate wanted to "dance battle" her.

"She did her part and so then I did my part. When I finished, everyone started laughing at me," Heaven recalled.

Heaven said that the following week, a girl grabbed her by the neck, pushed her against a wall, and a group of kids threw food at her. After her mother encouraged her to "defend herself", she was involved in a physical altercation and was suspended.

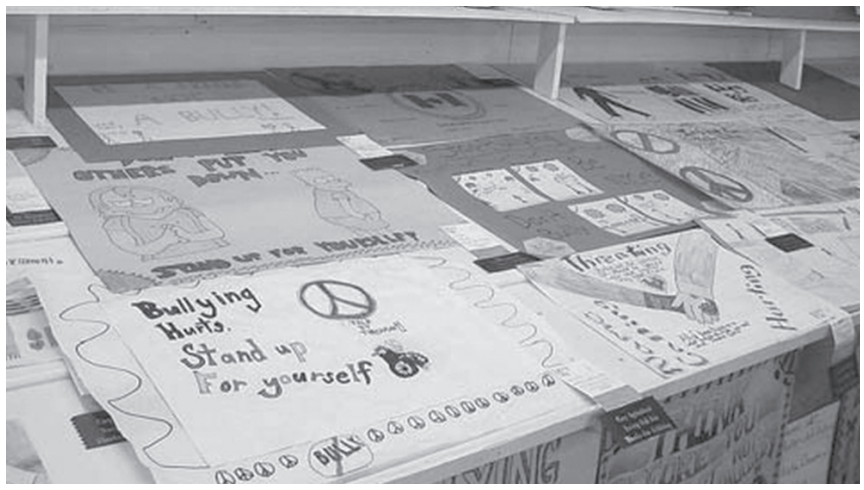
At one point, Heaven received a 20-day suspension. When Heaven was being considered for expulsion, Joanna said she received no notice from the school, and found out about the expulsion from another parent. Shortly thereafter, Heaven was expelled. Joanna said the administration punished her daughter for being bullied, instead of supporting her.

In about 85 percent of bullying cases, there is no sort of intervention made by teachers and/or administration officials, according to bullyingstatistics.org.

We should all be able to be happy at school, not frightened. Solving the bullying problem should start with our role models, like our school officials, who have the power take action.

Victims can play a role, too. If you are being bullied, stand up for yourself and speak up. No one has the right to hurt you physically nor emotionally. If you feel like nothing is being done, don't give up. Find an ally, whether it's a parent, a teacher or friend, and make sure you make your voice heard.

And for the rest of my fellow students, I encourage you to give that "weird" guy or girl in your class a chance and a voice. Don't judge the person next to you by how they look, but instead judge them by who they are. Not their chains or snapbacks or their expensive clothes, but their hearts and souls. We are all unique and beautiful in our own special way.



I can recall saying to one classmate in kindergarten, "Listen, this is my playground kid," as I held a pointy object to his neck.

When Cyberbullying Gets Real

Bianca Brooks and Sophie Varon / Youth Radio

NAM Editor's Note: The following report was culled from a live youth chat and survey conducted by Youth Radio in collaboration with New America Media.

Are you more likely to be bullied online or in person?

We asked that question in a poll. 64 people answered and what they said might surprise you. Despite the heavy media attention paid to cyberbullying as of late, according to a poll given to dozens young people across California, physical bullying remains a lot more common than cyberbullying.

Cyberbulling, however, is a major issue facing millennials. According to DoSomething.org, nearly 43% of kids have been bullied online and one in four has had it happen more than once. The most recent case to make headlines was Rebecca Sedwick's. The 12-year-old killed herself after being bullied online and in person by people at her school.

In collaboration with New America Media, Youth Radio teamed up with other young people around the country to discuss the complexity of cyberbullying along with possible solutions in a live chat.

Our survey results show that Facebook is the platform where people report seeing the most online bullying, but that's not the platform that chat participants were most eager to blame. That honor went to Ask.fm, a site that has recently come under criticism. This social media site is linked to a person's Facebook profile, and allows users to ask questions and open themselves up to anonymous responses. Some participants even suggested a campaign against the site to end the constant bullying. One participant wrote, "Only scary people use ask . It's dumb. You're basically looking for anonymous rude questions."Many young people on the chat said that they had witnessed cyberbullying, but never had it happen to them. As the Atlantic reported, cyberbullies may be sparking conflict online, but their actions often result in physical harm.

It's clear that it's now much easier to bully with the advent of social media, but what's not so clear is how to solve the issue. Chat participants had mixed reactions on solutions, with some arguing that more monitoring from schools and parents is not the answer. Recently, a California school district hired a firm called Geo Listening to monitor students' social media accounts. One chat participant stated, "That could make things worse, and it strips the freedoms and privacies of the users."

Another participant suggested that schools work with youth organizations to conduct cyberbullying seminars that educate young people on the issue. Though many on the chat believed this was a good idea, some worried that it would turn into the typical bullying seminar, where the adults talk and students listen, and nothing really gets done.

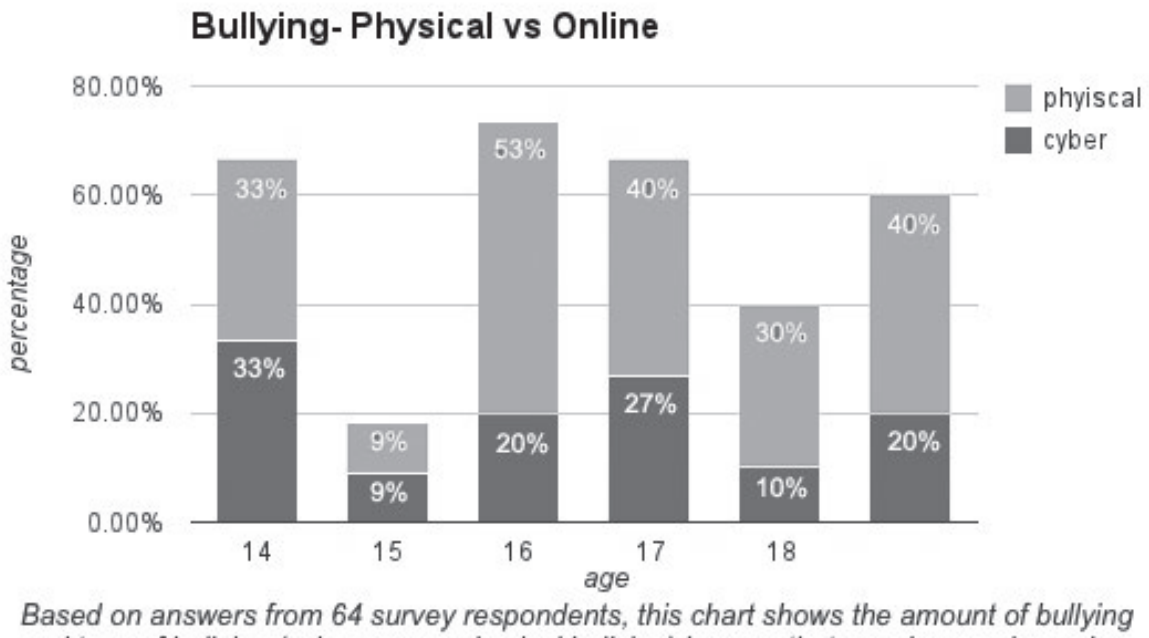
One participant suggested that schools should utilize media to help solve the problem. It wasn't until after seeing the movie Bully that the issue really meant anything to her. "I remember after seeing it a lot of my classmates were talking about how sad it was," she said. She suggested the discussion should be led by young people, so they're being "talked to, not talked at."

"They saw that it's really no joke and I remember one of my friends said 'Now I feel bad for when I do people like that,'" she wrote.

Some participants suggested more legislation against bullies, and others suggested that more people report abuse to site administrators. Others insisted that discipline should be left to parents, who should monitor their kids' social networks use more closely.

However, many chat participants advocated for students who are bullied to take more responsibility in the situation, and be pro-active finding solutions themselves. "If you feel like you're being harassed, log out and tell someone," said one participant. Participants agreed that the victims hold the real power when they inform an adult of the issue before it escalates. One participant wrote, "If you want to take your life back, the first step is logging out."

Interestingly enough, while talking about victims of cyberbullying our debate inside the chat itself got a little heated (see left image). Luckily it did not result in insults, because participants, unlike bullies, could agree to disagree.



Based on answers from 64 survey respondents, this chart shows the amount of bullying and type of bullying (cyber versus physical bullying) by age, that people experienced.

My Sister's Story: 'Broken' Taillight Leads to Deportation

By Anonymous for South Kern Sol

Editor's Note: California Governor Jerry Brown recently signed into law a bill (AB60) that will allow undocumented immigrants to have driver's licenses, making it potentially safer for those immigrants to drive without fear of deportation. The author of this piece wished to keep their identity and that of their family members anonymous, so aliases were used.

ARVIN, Calif. — It is often said that family is everything in life, and in that sense I am fortunate to have grown up in a family of nine brothers and sisters. Life wasn't always easy for us, but we lived comfortably and most importantly, we were happy. But everything changed three years ago, when my 22-year-old sister was deported to Mexico. Ever since, my family and I have lived with such emptiness in our hearts.

My parents brought us from Michoacán, Mexico, to Arvin, California, in 2001. I was in the second grade and my sister, Blanca (who would later be deported), was 12-years-old. When we arrived here, my dad immediately got a job working in the fields.

There was a time when I admired the fairness of our government and justice system. Yet after seeing what happened to my sister, my views have changed.

Our nightmare began on a Friday in December 2010. I was walking home from Arvin High School with my sister, Marylou. We were talking about going to dinner with Blanca and my other sister, Samantha, since we hadn't seen them in a while. A few minutes into our conversation, Marylou got a call from Samantha with some frightening news: Blanca had been arrested.

I felt the blood rush through my body, and for what seemed like an eternity, my whole world stopped. All I could hear was the panicking beat of my heart. The rest of our walk felt like the longest walk home I'd ever had. I remember hoping that maybe, by the time I got home, things would be all better. But that wasn't the case.

My family had always feared law enforcement because we were undocumented. Any mistake we made could have meant deportation for us. But when my sister Blanca showed up with a ticket in her hand for a broken taillight – which she hadn't thought was broken – we didn't worry about it much because my brother had once gotten a speeding ticket and had paid it, without any further repercussions. Little did we know then that Blanca's ticket would profoundly change her life, and ours.

The week after Blanca was pulled over for the broken taillight, she went to the courthouse to check on the status of her ticket. To her surprise, the ticket wasn't in the system. In the following weeks, she began to wonder whether the cop had forgotten to report the ticket, until one day she received a notice in the mail telling her to come to the courthouse to resolve it.

The very next day, after her class at Bakersfield College, my sister headed back to the Kern County Courthouse in Bakersfield. When she arrived she was met with an arrest warrant, and handcuffed.

At first I'd thought it was all just a big mistake, that my sister was the victim of a glitch in the system. But then I learned that what happened to my sister has happened to others under the Secured Communities (S-Comm) program. According to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU):

"S-Comm has led to the deportation of over 92,000 California residents as of January 2013 – more than any other state. Contrary to the program's stated goal of prioritizing serious felony offenses, the vast majority of those deported, about 7 out of 10, are categorized by ICE as either 'non-criminals' or individuals with lesser offenses, including traffic violations."

There was a time when I admired the fairness of our government and justice system. Yet after seeing what happened to my sister, my views have changed. My sister's taillight was not broken. Could the "broken taillight" have been an excuse made up by the officer to pull over my sister and check her immigration status?

After she spent about two weeks in jail, without visits from family members, and after countless meetings with lawyers, my sister realized that it would be far too costly to hire a lawyer to fight her case, so she agreed to a voluntary deportation.

Not having my sister here with me while I finished my senior year, or during my first year at Bakersfield College, has created a dark and empty hole in my heart. I haven't been able to hug my sister, spend a day with her, or simply have her hold my hand when I had a problem I couldn't face alone. There are nights when all I can do is think about her. I cry, and my sadness turns to anger. I'm angry at the fact that my sister was torn from me without letting me say good-bye or spend time with her before she left.

When I found out last year that President Obama had issued Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), granting temporary legal status to those of us who arrived here as children, it was a bittersweet moment because I knew it was too late for my sister. I thought of how unfortunate she was, given that if she had not been deported, she too would have been able to apply for DACA, just like me and our other two sisters.

I miss her so much, and I've never understood why she was the one who had to have this horrific experience.

After being deported, my sister was able to situate herself with a friend of one of my siblings in Mexico, and they have been kind enough to take her in as one of their own. But it doesn't take away the fact that she has been without her own family — to be there on her birthday, Christmas, or to see the birth of her nephews. The amazing thing is that she hasn't lost her smile. I maintain hope that she will soon see her family again.

Black Parents in LA: This Is What Our Kids Need to Succeed at School

New America Media, Video, text: George White // video: Min Lee

LOS ANGELES — The State of California should finance programs specifically designed to improve the academic performance of African-American students, and community activists need a media platform to mobilize more black parents to join in on efforts to improve their schools.

Those recommendations topped a list of school funding priorities laid out by African-American parents at an education forum organized for parents and the black media in Los Angeles last week.

The comments on education finance were in response to California's recently enacted Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) which will bring increased state funding to school districts over the next eight years. Under LCFF, the state is to provide the greatest funding increases to schools in low-income communities and those with large numbers of students who are learning English as a second language.

A number of the participants at the forum – organized by New America Media and held last week at the Baldwin Hills Library – said the state should also provide additional funding to improve the English-language skills of many black students.

Los Angeles Sentinel columnist Larry Aubry, noting the academic achievement gaps between blacks and whites, said such a program would help African-American students.

"People don't understand that black kids are held back simply because of the way they speak," he said.

Marian Thomas, a parent at the forum, agreed that many black students need additional language instruction. She cited the work of Ernie Smith, a linguistics scholar at Charles R. Drew University of Medicine and Science in Los Angeles. In his books and research, said Thomas, Smith shows how enslaved Africans incorporated English vocabulary into African-based syntax -- a pattern of speaking that continues to this day.

Some black organizations in Los Angeles have already supported the call for classroom instruction to address what some consider a linguistic divide. For example, the Los Angeles-based Black Community, Clergy and Labor Alliance (BCCLA), an organization whose members include representatives from the local chapters of the NAACP and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), commented on the issue in a recent statement about equity in education:

Black students "have unique linguistic and cultural histories and experiences that must be understood and accepted through the implementation of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy," said BCCLA.

Yolande Beckles, a member of the California Title 1 Parent Union, also called for school district and state action that would focus attention on improving education for African Americans.

"People don't understand that black kids are held back simply because of the way they speak"

"There is no legislation that specifically benefits African-American students," she said. "We have to advocate for legislation for our community."

Beckles said there is a small number of black "parent professionals" who are advocates for African-American youth, and that a broader movement would be needed to achieve change.

Rashunda Rene, director the Los Angeles-based Committed to Uplifting Single Parents (CUSP), said she would like to take part in a communications campaign to inform and mobilize black parents.

A lack of parental involvement at school and the failure of some black parents to hold their children accountable for their behavior are the primary reasons why a disproportionate number of black males are expelled or suspended from school, said Jerry Delaney, another parent at the forum.

"Many of us are sending our kids to school undisciplined," he said.

Delaney said he was a troubled student as a boy until his mother discovered negative patterns and corrected them. "It all starts in the home," he said. "If you stress education at home and provide discipline at home, students will do well in school."

However, Luis South, a member of the Los Angeles-based Black Parent Union, said school districts also bear some responsibility.

"We need people (school personnel) with proper training and understanding" of black and Latino boys, he said.

Another participant, Zella Knight, said the new funding formula would only help improve the academic performance of black students if African-American parents engaged their local school district officials.

"It's just not going to happen without accountability," she said.

The funding formula law requires school districts to involve parents in decision-making on how additional funds are spent. However, Knight and some other forum participants said black parents must be more organized if they are to monitor school officials and serve as more effective advocates for their children.

To see the video, scan this QR code with your smart phone's bar code reader

New Resources, Old Obstacles for Vets With PTSD

Alfredo Camacho / South Kern Sol

Transitioning back to civilian life after combat was a lot different for 65-year-old Richard Knight than it has been for 29-year-old Wesley León-Barrientos. Unlike during the Vietnam War-era when Knight was a soldier, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is today a widely recognized diagnosis among younger veterans who have seen combat in Iraq and Afghanistan, and who have more opportunities to get the support they need to cope.

"There are resources available by and for veterans where you can help each other through this," said Knight, a Vietnam veteran living in southwest Bakersfield, whose untreated PTSD led him down a path of alcohol and drug abuse.

After driving over a roadside bomb and being hit by 122 millimeter rounds, he severely injured both of his legs, broke his back and jaw, and sustained a serious injury to his head.

Above: Vietnam veteran Joe Acosta and Iraq war veteran Wesley León-Barrientos at the Bakersfield Veterans Center / photo: Alfredo Camacho

During his darkest moments, Knight sold marijuana and just barely avoided becoming one of the many Vietnam veterans incarcerated in California's prisons. Today, that group is estimated to make up as much as 25 percent of the state's prison population.

If Knight had been arrested, he might never have been able to get treatment for his PTSD or receive other critical benefits from the Bakersfield Veterans Center that he now frequents: service members suffering from untreated PTSD who commit crimes or break military rules can be discharged from the military with an "other than honorable discharge." And veterans who are not discharged honorably are not entitled to receive benefits from the Veterans Administration, including mental health services that can help treat PTSD.

Timing is key for treating PTSD, but often returning veterans don't recognize the need or are not willing to admit they need help until it's too late, explained Joe Acosta, a counselor at the Bakersfield Veterans' Center.

"It's like the last few weeks before graduating high school: you're required to go and attend but mentally, you've checked out," said Acosta. "That's what happens with soldiers about to leave the force, they're required to attend briefings to transition them back to civilian life, but there's no way to make sure they actually listen and put the information to practice."

This was true for León-Barrientos, who was born in Guatemala and served the United States during three deployments in Iraq.

"Yeah, they tell you, 'this is where you go [for services],' but at that time, you don't care about that stuff," recounted León-Barrientos. "I cared more about being home and I was tired of being away for so long."

It wasn't until Leon-Barrientos noticed he was having difficulties spending quality time with his daughter that he realized something might be wrong.

"I used to be really distant, detached. I couldn't be happy. I would spend time with my daughter by playing a DVD for her, and basically making sure she doesn't die on me," he explained. "Now, I take her to the park, we go out to dinner — actually, we like to go ice skating. I use a sled and I just pull her along."

León-Barrientos said the turnaround came after he began seeing a counselor at the Bakersfield Veterans Center to address the trauma he experienced while serving in Iraq. After driving over a roadside bomb and being hit by 122millimeter rounds, he severely injured both of his legs, broke his back and jaw, and sustained a serious injury to his head.

Incredibly, León-Barrientos established a positive attitude about his physical injuries from the start. He just never imagined that the psychological impact of war would be the biggest hurdle he'd have to overcome. "I felt like I was alive, I would be ok, and it would be hard work to get moving again. But it wasn't as hard as dealing with the PTSD," he said.

At the veteran's center, he was encouraged by Knight and Acosta to get treated for PTSD right away, an opportunity the two older veterans had never had themselves.

"Post-traumatic stress disorder wasn't even in the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) when we came back from Vietnam," explained Acosta. "Plus, the public saw terrible images of what we went through in Vietnam, and when we came back, we were called 'baby killers' and things like that, so life for veterans was especially difficult [back] then."

Acosta says that despite the fact that mental health resources are more available now than they ever have been, there are still many who fall through the cracks and don't get the help they need.

Leon-Barrientos said the other veterans he met at the center are what made a difference for him.

"Coming here was like finding my brothers and sisters again, because everyone here understands each other. Even with just a look, we understand," he said.

Why Aren't More Youth Applying for DACA?

Nancy Lopez / South Kern Sol

Nearly fifteen months after the Obama administration announced Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), approximately half of all eligible immigrants in California had yet to apply. The program offers temporary legal status to qualifying undocumented immigrants who entered the country at or before age 16, and who have lived in the United States continuously since 2007.

According to the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) there are approximately 300,000 individuals who meet DACA's age, educational, and other eligibility criteria in California.

Young graduate encourages her students to take advantage of all opportunities available to them.

Can't cover the cost

Although the application fee of $465 has been attainable for many individuals, in part given the employment opportunities that can open up once one receives a legal work permit, many immigrant families don't earn enough to afford the fee.

It took over a year of saving for Martha Lopez, 18, a recent high school graduate living in Bakersfield, to be able to send in her DACA application.

"I couldn't afford [to apply] because I didn't have a good paying job. [I was getting paid] between $7 and $16 a day, so it was hard for me to pay the $465," said Lopez. "I was going to school and working about 12 hours per week, so money was very short. I had to pay for tuition, room and board, school supplies, transportation, food, bills and other expenses."

Another DACA-eligible immigrant living in Bakersfield, a 29-year-old who wished to only give her last name, Gonzalez, due to her undocumented status, shared a story similar to Lopez's.

"I didn't have the money, since my partner is the only one that works, and that money is to support our family," said Gonzalez, who waited several months while gathering the money for the application fee.

While Lopez and Gonzalez were eventually able to save enough money to apply for DACA, that hasn't been the case for one young immigrant in Fresno, who also offered only her last name, Gutierrez.

Gutierrez began the DACA application process, only to have it halted because her family did not have the funds to cover the cost of her application fee. "The process started with filling out papers, but it (eventually) requires spending money too. This is where I stopped completing the (DACA) process."

The young woman said that she also did not have a passport from her home country, a requirement when applying for DACA. Obtaining the passport, she said, would have cost her an additional $80. "If I wanted to continue, I would need almost $600 to process the rest of my paperwork. This was money that my parents did not have. So we took a little break while we tried to save."

Gutierrrez's parents planned to wait until they received their tax returns, to pay the fee and complete the process for their daughter. That changed, however, when the father saw an opportunity to improve his family's lot by opening a small business.

"All of our money, including the savings my brother and I had, was put into that store, which I proudly stand by with my family," said Gutierrez. However, she said, that meant "my [application] was put once more on hold, because we lacked the money."

DACA does offer the possibility of a fee-waiver, but it is only for very special cases.

According to U.S. Customs and Immigration Services (USCIS), one must be under the age of 18 and also meet one of the following requirements: being homeless, in foster care or without any support from parents or family, having an income less than 150 percent of the U.S. poverty level, or not being able to care for oneself because of a chronic disability, among others.

For Jovana Lopez, 28, of Bakersfield, the high cost of the DACA application led her to organize a food and bake sale, which ultimately allowed her, and other applicants who got involved, to cover the fee. "Selling chocolates, cookies and food might sound ridiculous to raise funds, but thanks to the support of many, this helped us to pay for our DACA applications," she enthused.

Lack of awareness

Cost isn't the only reason DACA-eligible immigrants are not applying. Some remain unaware of the program, don't know where to obtain the application and supporting documents, or have difficulties completing the application once they have it.

"I read over all the paperwork, which must have been more than 15 pages. I understood none of it," said Gutierrez. "The questions were extremely vague. In the end, once my father got tired of hearing my excuse of not being able to understand, and reading it over and over in front of him, he decided that we should wait until we could [have someone explain it to us]," said Gutierrez.

The forms needed to apply for DACA can be obtained through the USCIS website, along with detailed information about what is required to complete them, and details about the legislation including guidelines for eligibility.

Maria Olaguez, an Immigration Attorney who practices in Kern County, said many of her clients are confused by the application process, or scared that a misdemeanor or minor legal infraction may disqualify them or even lead to deportation.

Olaguez advises Dreamers and other immigrants who think they may qualify for DACA to seek legal advice from an attorney before filling out their application.

"There are attorneys who are willing to help Dreamers for low cost," said Olaguez. And, "not every crime or infraction disqualifies you from DACA," she added.

Greater security, for those who get it

"I feel more secure and worry less," said Luis Ojeda, 23, a recent Political Science graduate, who applied for DACA last December and received his approval five months ago. "I have been able to take advantage of the deferred action benefits to further my involvement in the community," said Ojeda.

"Now that I have a work permit, I'm able to apply for better job positions with a higher salary [and] I have a driver's license, [so] I'm less afraid to drive and go places," said Jovana Lopez, who was only working 12 hours-per-week, prior to receiving his work permit.

Martha Lopez, who is still in the process and has not yet received her approval, shared, "I hope with this permit my life will change for the better by getting an education and a better job."

Additional reporting by the kNOW Youth Media in Fresno.

In Central Valley, College Students Spend Vacation in the Fields

Pictured above: Christian Contreras / Photo by Erika Villasenor

Eroka Villasenor / South Kern Sol

ARVIN, Calif. — This small town in South Kern County is home to many farm workers, including young college students eager to make some cash during their summer break. And although it may seem strange to those living outside of California's Central Valley, working in the fields, although physically demanding, can be a gratifying experience for many of them.

Analleli Gallardo, 20, an Arvin High School graduate majoring in women and gender studies at San Francisco State University, has worked in the fields for three straight summers. When asked what keeps her coming back, Gallardo said her primary motivation is the quick money.

"I need as much money as I can get in as little time as possible, because I am a full-time student living off FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) money, scholarships, loans and the occasional part-time job. Working in the fields can give me more money faster because we work six days per week, and we work from eight to nine hours a day."

Contreras said he experienced carpal tunnel syndrome in his hands and wrists on his first day of work. "I'm now experiencing lower back pain that I've never had before due to the constant lifting of grape boxes," he added. "I now also experience knee pain from constantly being on my knees while picking. I feel as though my health has gotten worse because of the long exposure to pesticide." He says the work has had a negative impact on his eating habits: after a long day of intense physical work in the fields, he often doesn't have the energy to cook healthy meals.

Despite the negative health impacts on his body, Contreras believes the experience he's gained has been worth it, giving him a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the people in his small community.

Farm work fuels dreams

Gallardo and Contreras say their experience in the fields has had a definite and dramatic impact on their college experience.

"Working in the fields has just made me realize how privileged and lucky I am to go to college," said Gallardo. "Many people such as undocumented or homeless youth don't receive that opportunity as easily. Many people are basically forced to work in the fields to provide food on the table for their family—some of those people being younger than me."

Contreras adds that farm work has enhanced his college experience by teaching him that he is capable of achieving anything he sets his mind to. Farm work, he said, has motivated him to be a good student, to seek a rewarding and successful career, to value basic living necessities, and to search for other means of financial aid to cover some of his financial burdens.

Fieldwork, he said, "also taught me to remember where I'm from—no matter if I'm studying in San Francisco or New York. My roots are here in Arvin, with farm workers."

Q&A: Turning Away From 'Zero Tolerance'

Interview by Nicole Hudley / New America Media

Ed. Note: Recent data published by the Civil Rights Project at UCLA shows that suspensions and expulsions are on the rise — roughly one in 9 students, nationally, were suspended during the 2009/10 academic year — and that racial disparities are widening. In California, several large school districts are seeking to reverse those trends. In Fresno, Superintendent Michael Hanson, on account of chronic high suspension and expulsion rates in his district, announced last year that he would throw out the zero tolerance policy on discipline and begin funding district-wide restorative justice programs instead. Los Angeles Unified and Long Beach Unified have also moved away from zero-tolerance school discipline policies since this interview was originally published in April 2013. With interest in alternative discipline models growing, New America Media spoke with Jane Stevens, a longtime journalist and the founder of Aces Too High, a blog site that covers issues related to childhood trauma.

New America Media: Given the recent focus on approaches to reducing suspensions, why are suspension rates a problem for California?

Jane Stevens: Suspension rates for California schools are just way too high. If you look at the data you'll see – some schools had more suspensions than they had students.

NAM: What are some of issues that might lead to a student being suspended and how can things be done differently?

Stevens: Little triggers, depending on what's happening in a kid's life -- say a teacher yelling -- can just set the kid off. Or a loud noise can set a kid off who is living in a neighborhood where there is a lot of gun violence.

A kid in San Francisco had to spend the night at a hotel because there's gun violence outside of the home. That's pretty freaky for a young kid and anything might set that kid off. So when they come to school the next morning, we say, let's just give this kid a big long time out and let them go into the "peace corner" with a cozy bean bag and just listen to soothing music for a while, or they can pop bubble wrap, or massage their hands with lotion, or do breathing exercises. These tools [allow students] to recognize when they are becoming like a volcano and they can begin self-regulation before things get out of hand.

NAM: Can you describe what kind of work Safe and Civil Schools has done in Fresno?

Stevens: With Safe and Civil Schools in particular, we look for the kids that are having issues -- it's not just the kids that are acting out, but also the kids that are withdrawn and quiet. They're so frightened that they're just turning off. It's checking in with those kids and seeing how they're doing and how we can offer help.

Safe and Civil Schools also helps give teachers tools to help them deal with issues before the situation gets out of hand. Before, if there was a kid that the teacher just didn't get along with, they would already have a referral slip filled out, and all the kid had to do was say "Boo" and they would be sent to the principal's office.

NAM: And you also deal with the larger school community, correct?

Stevens: Safe and Civil Schools sets up a school wide system for school wide goals and values, things like respect and academic achievement. It sets in place what the behavioral expectations are. It acknowledges kids for good behavior. It also puts in place a reporting system so the principal can get an idea of how things are progressing and make changes in the classroom.

NAM: What can schools do with this data?

Stevens: In one high school, in Kings County, they were looking at the data – and in all the classes on one particular day there was a lot of behavior issues. They had a whole bunch of referrals just during a particular class period. They had just changed the class schedule – and on that day that class was almost 2 hours long. With the data, the school figured out what was going on and made changes, like offering a break, so they weren't expecting a student to sit for 2 hours.

NAM: How does the approach of the Safe and Civil Schools program compare to restorative justice programs?

Stevens: Restorative justice practices are very useful, but a school that does only restorative justice practices won't be helping all the students. It really only helps the students that have the least behavior problems. For a restorative justice practice to work, the student has to have already calmed down ... then they can acknowledge what happened and deal with the aftermath. Restorative justice also doesn't address a student that's too depressed.

NAM: How would Safe and Civil Schools help calm a student down?

Stevens: You do not lock them up in an isolation room. You do get them away from everyone else, but you get someone who can talk them down. You really have to think about how your brain is structured. When you're traumatized, your lower brain takes over. It's like a rider on a horse and the horse is going crazy. You've got to help the kid calm down. It might take an hour or two to get that thinking brain back on the horse and assimilate the information. When that thinking brain is off, nothing will penetrate.

NAM: Is trauma really an issue for many students?

Stevens: The data shows that 66 percent Americans have endured some type of severe or chronic trauma. But when you have 2 or 3 or 4 types of chronic trauma going on at once, that's when you have a kid that's just walking on the edge all the time. Kids like this are practically guaranteed to not be engaged, because their minds aren't capable. If that school is adding to the trauma that the kid is already experiencing, than that kid doesn't have a chance.

For Some English Learners, Math Fluency Transcends Language

Ed. Note: When it comes to math, English Learner (EL) students – the fastest growing segment of public school students in the country – continue to fall near the bottom in state and national assessments. According to the 2013 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), in California only 8 percent of fourth-graders and 3 percent of eight-grade EL students tested proficient. But for some immigrant students, who struggle to adjust to a new language and culture, math can be the great equalizer. Many discover a fluency in numbers made possible in large part thanks to exposure in their home countries, where math instruction often outpaces levels in U.S. classrooms.

Nancy Lopez and Daniel Jimenez / South Kern Sol

Math is Harder in Mexico

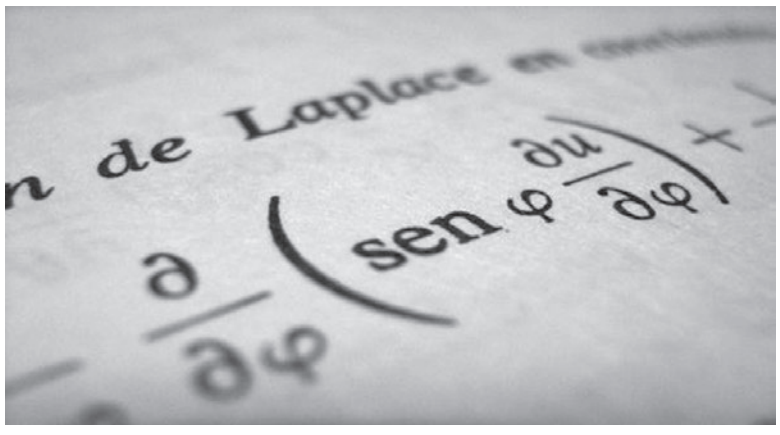
Coming to the United States at the age of 13 was without doubt a difficult experience. Being at school and not understanding anything beyond "Hi", "Bye" and "What is your name?" was very frustrating, especially because I cherished academics.

But there was always one class where I did not feel inferior to other students, and in fact felt as or more competent than them: math.

The first math class I was placed into was extremely easy. I'd learned the entire curriculum already back in Mexico, where by first grade students are expected to memorize multiplication tables up to 12. That doesn't happen here until third or fourth grade. By seventh grade, I was learning to do square roots without a calculator, something even college students here do not do.

I also couldn't understand why it was that in U.S. schools there were different levels of math for students of the same grade level. In Mexico, students in the same grade are all expected to meet the same standard or they're held back.

But the fact that math education in Mexico is more rigorous than here is usually overlooked by school administrators. I for one wasn't tested to see what level of math I was to be placed in. It's as if their expectations of my math proficiency was by default lower because I was an EL student.



While school officials might think that placing EL students in remedial math – because of our lack of fluency in English – is helping us get ahead, the reality is that for many of us – myself included – it becomes yet one more hurdle to overcome.

The fact that math education in Mexico is more rigorous than here is usually overlooked by school administrators.

I remember passing by an algebra class at school, wishing I could have been placed there. I imagined how much more engaging the class was compared to the math course I was placed in, and began to think about how I was seen as somehow less intelligent by the school because I could not speak English.

Math is as critical now as it has ever been to success in school and beyond, for all students, English learners included. That we're not fluent in the language does not mean that we should be held to mediocre expectations.

Nancy Lopez lives in Bakersfield. She recently graduated from California State University Fresno and is a reporter for South Kern Sol.

The One Class Where 'I Felt Like I Fit'

I grew up in a small town close to Culiacan, in the state of Sinaloa, Mexico. I attended a modest school named after the first indigenous president of Mexico, Benito Juarez. I was considered a bright child, and was always in the top percent of my class. I was receiving scholarships and awards even before middle school.

My favorite subject then was history, thanks to my grandfather, who shared stories with me about the Mexican revolution, and revolutionary heroes like Emiliano Zapata and 'Pancho' Villa. My worst class was math, but that would soon change.

When I was 13 years old, my mother told my younger brother and I that we were going to move to el norte. And just like that, we left behind family, friends and everything else we knew to create a new life here in 'Califas, the land of the opportunity.'

We settled in Taft, a small city near Bakersfield. It was hard adapting, especially to school. I remember school administrators wanted to hold me back a grade because I didn't speak the language. My mom pushed back and thankfully won the day on that.

But still, I felt lost and confused those first weeks. I hated English class, and quickly lost interest in history. Surprisingly, math became one of the easiest subjects for me. And I soon grew to enjoy it. It was one of the few classes – aside from PE – where I actually felt like I fit in because I knew what I was doing.

I realized pretty quickly that math education in Mexico surpasses instruction here, where the material we learn in schools is more basic. In Mexico, students have to learn the material or they are not able to pass grade levels. Here, it's a different story; it's very easy to pass grade levels even if students do not do well in class.

By my sophomore year in high school math had become my strongest area, though I still struggled with English. I remember taking the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE), worrying that if I didn't pass I'd not be able to graduate. When the results came in, I discovered that I'd passed the math section on my first try. I didn't do as well in English, though I did manage to pass the test the following year.

And while at the end of the day I decided that math, as a career path, just wasn't for me, for those first years here it was a major confidence builder that helped me excel in school despite the frustrations with language. I'm now a senior at California State University Bakersfield and am majoring in communications with a minor in Latin American Studies. I guess I never really lost interest in my grandpa's stories about La Revolucion Mexicana and its heroes.

Daniel Jimenez lives in Taft, Calif., and is a Senior at CSU, Bakersfield majoring in Communications. He also works as a reporter for South Kern Sol.

Often Ignored, Pacific Islanders Fight for Their Education Alone

Michael Lozano / VoiceWaves

LONG BEACH -- Kulia I Ka Nu'u. This was the motto of Hawaii's Queen Kapi'olani, one she told her people, which means, "Strive for the very top of the mountain; strive for excellence." It's a message that still has relevance for the U.S.-based Pacific Islander community that more often than not is left to overcome challenges on its own.

For years Pacific Islanders from Hawaii, Samoa, Tonga and Guam have been misunderstood in the U.S., due in no small part to their inclusion under the umbrella term Asian Pacific Islander (API). With use of the term becoming widespread since the 1990's, the specific struggles faced by the Islander community have been obscured. Lumped together with other Asians and stereotyped as a model minority, Pacific Islander issues have been left out, for example, of the national discourse on education.

The reality is that Pacific Islanders (PI) are only half as likely as the general population to have graduated from college, and are five times less likely than other Asians to hold an advanced degree. Like some Latino and African-American communities, many in the Pacific Islander community face economic and structural barriers to academic success.

"As communities of color, we're faced with a lot of the same issues," said Joey Quenga, who is Chamorro from Guam and host of The BBQ, a monthly radio show for the PI community that runs out of the Pacific Islander Ethnic Museum in Long Beach. "You're talking about impoverished communities and you're talking about gangs."

issue in the community as the Tongan Crip Gang, Sons of Samoa, and other gangs roam the tough parts of L.A. County, Hatori said. One of those areas is West Long Beach.

"When you don't have much money, you live in areas where it's gang infested and there's a lot of crime," said West Long Beach resident Seila Tuliau, the mother of a former Sons of Samoa gang member. "It's the only area you can afford to live. It has a big effect on growing up because those are the people you hang out with."

Hatori suggested that more awareness is needed of the specific issues confronting the Pacific Islander community.

"Being grouped in with all Asians when using the term API (Asian Pacific Islander) in statistics to judge whether a particular race or ethnicity is doing well or not is often deceptive," Hatori said. "People who are not very knowledgeable on the issues the Pacific Island community face will look at API numbers and think Pacific Islanders are not struggling at all," he added.

Such misconceptions are having horrid effects on Pacific Islanders' prospects for scholarships, advocates argue, and therefore college access. Many scholarship programs decline applications by Pacific Islanders, mistakenly assuming those students are as privileged as their peers from other Asian backgrounds. When, in fact, 19 percent of Tongans are currently living at the poverty rate.

To see the video, scan this QR code with your smart phone's bar code reader

Lumped together with other Asians and stereotyped as a model minority, Pacific Islander issues have been left out of the national discourse on education.

One of the fastest-growing immigrant groups in the nation, 23 percent of all Pacific Islanders living in the U.S. currently reside in California, according to the 2010 U.S. Census. Many of them live in West Long Beach, and surrounding cities like Carson, Cerritos and Oceanside.

Pacific Islanders have the highest high school dropout rate in Long Beach—with rates at about 10 percent, compared to a three percent rate for both Asian and white students. Nine out of 10 Pacific Islander students are not prepared for college-level coursework, according to a study by Education Trust-West.

"Many come to the States and are unable to immediately find a well-paying job," said Dan Hatori, Project Director of UCLA's Pacific Islander Education and Retention Program, in an email to VoiceWaves. "This leads to students being enrolled in public schools with curriculum which may be less rigorous than other schools."

Violence and gang affiliation may be another barrier for some PI youth. Violence has become a pressing

Despite such barriers, many remain steadfast in their dreams for success and continue to see education as a path to their dreams.

"I'm going back to school," said Eric Tuliau, who joined Sons of Samoa at age 15 but is not involved with the gang anymore. "I'm going to get my GED. I also hope my little brothers and sisters go to school."

Quenga has also left behind a legacy. His fraternity, TAO, was founded by Pacific Islander students in 1997 and continues to exist at various campuses today. Members of the fraternity are now employed at UCLA and in the White House, and the name TAO has significance for young aspiring Pacific Islander students today.

"It's a word in the Pacific Islands that means warrior," Quenga said. "We see ourselves as warriors here in the new land. Instead of spears and slings in fighting the enemy, our weapon of choice is a bachelors, a masters, or a PHD."

The End of the School Bus

Pictured Above: Students crowd onto a public bus to get to school in the Southern California city of Long Beach. Photo by Summer Culbreth

Summer Culbreth and Kazmere Duffey / VoiceWaves

LONG BEACH -- Backpack, check. Breakfast, check. Out the door you go and you're thinking, "Today will be a good day." But just as you walk to the bus stop, you see the bus fly by. Why didn't it stop? It was too full. So you wait. The next bus comes and it's full too, from the front door to the back. So what do you do? You beg the bus driver to let you on. As you enter the bus people are yelling, coughing and laughing in your ear. Every time the bus stops, 25 people nearly knock you over from the force of stopping.

By the time you do manage to get to school, you're in a bad mood. On top of that, you're forced to go to detention because you're late. These are just some of the things that come with the territory when you're a young person who relies on public transit in Long Beach.

Taking the city bus has become practically mandatory for many students in Long Beach, even while the number of bus lines serving Long Beach residents has shrunk, due to state and local budget cuts in recent years. Over the last four years, the city's municipal transit agency, LB Transit, has undergone a series of service reductions, route eliminations and fare hikes.

Things got worse last fall, when all home-to-school bus service – the exception being shuttles for special needs students -- was cut, forcing more students than ever before to switch over to public transit buses and pay bus fees.

The elimination of regular school bus service came after two years of gradual reductions in "yellow bus" services.

"I live far from my school, so getting there on time is a hassle in the mornings," said Nia Gastlem, a senior at Millikan High School. "Every now and then I have to take the bus, which never fails to get me to school late. That then causes me to spend my mornings in on-campus suspension, which forces me to miss out on a whole class period."

Long Beach has a reputation for being bike-friendly and public transit-friendly, with a heavily used bus system and the Metro Blue line. Many people – from students, to elderly, to disabled folks – rely on public transportation on a daily basis to get from one destination to another.

"Every week I'm forced to fight for a seat with roughly 50 other students trying to claim their spot on the bus," said Osayama Omoruyi, a junior at Millikan High School.

Students aren't the only ones affected by overcrowding on city buses. With more riders, the elderly often risk being crowded out of their priority seating, or not being able to board the bus at all.

Kevin Lee, customer and relations manager at LB Transit, said the agency is working to accommodate the influx of new riders, by coordinating its pick-up and drop-off times in accordance with a school's bell schedule.

"Since they've been eliminating the yellow school buses, we've seen a lot of students come on board our buses and it's not easy to manage," Lee said. "We're going to do the best we can."

Lee said LB Transit's budget does not currently allow them to add extra bus routes but it is constantly looking at its service areas for "creative planning."

The squeeze on the city bus system has been intensifying ever since Long Beach Unified District (LBUSD) ended bus service to one-third of its riders in the fall of 2011, a response to California state budget cuts that did away with home-to-school bus services. At that time, state cutbacks left districts to foot the bill for their school transportation services.

A number of other districts in the state, including larger districts like San Francisco and San Diego, have also chosen to reduce school bus services in recent years due to budget restraints.

Despite the impending cuts, there may soon be relief for local school districts. The new funding formula for schools devised by California Gov. Jerry Brown includes direct funding for home-to-school transportation. But the legislation only requires that districts spend no less than they did on home-to-school transportation during the 2012/13 academic year.

Meanwhile, students will continue to bump elbows on the city buses.

"My backpack weighs a thousand pounds and after carrying my backpack and my gym bag for track practice, standing on the bus really isn't an option. I need a seat," said Corrina Leblanc, a senior at Millikan.

Summer Culbreth and Kazmere Duffey are contributors to VoiceWaves, a youth and community media project founded by New America Media to inform and engage the diverse communities of Long Beach, California.

Openly Gay, Secretly Undocumented

Brenda R. Rincon / Coachella Uninc.

PALM SPRINGS, Calif. – Juan Ceballos came to the United States so he could live freely as an openly gay man. But the move came with a high cost: he had to take on another secret identity as an undocumented immigrant.

Ceballos was 17 when he entered the United States by foot, a backpack on his shoulders, easily passing as an American student through the Tijuana border.

He quickly realized that, as an undocumented immigrant, it wouldn't be easy to stay in the United States. And as a gay man, it wouldn't be easy to go back to Mexico.

Ultimately, his fear of being deported outweighed his fear of being ostracized in Mexico. "To be here was more difficult," says Ceballos. "I was afraid."

After only two months of living as an undocumented immigrant in the United States, Ceballos decided to go back to Mexico.

But he didn't last long there either.

His return to his hometown of San Luis Potosí, in central Mexico, thrust him back into the same bullying and verbal abuse that he had tried to escape.

Ceballos, who knew he was gay at a very young age, had a difficult relationship with his father, who he describes as "macho." The treatment he received from his father upon his return home eventually drew him back to the United States.

"My experience in Mexico was not good the last time I went to my hometown [because of] my father," he says.

Three years later, Ceballos left Mexico for good. When his father passed away several years ago, he didn't go to the services.

"I don't want to say it this way, but I am glad he passed away. I wanted to be myself."

Openly gay, secretly undocumented

Back in San Diego, he struggled to find work. He eventually found a job at a nursing home. When he wasn't working, he read books to learn English and started venturing out to gay bars.

Then he fell in love, and he says it empowered him to live openly as a gay man – but he remained closeted as an undocumented immigrant.

"I always say to everyone 'I'm gay.' I'm not afraid (of that)," he said. "Here, I am free to say 'I'm gay. It's difficult to say 'I'm illegal.'"

His legal status took a toll on the relationship. Although his partner knew he was undocumented, Ceballos would not travel for fear of deportation and was consumed with the stress of being found out.

While living in San Diego, Ceballos was startled when a neighbor proudly told him she had called immigration on an undocumented person working at a nearby hotel.

Eventually he and his partner broke up, and a heartbroken Ceballos decided to move to the gay-friendly city of Palm Springs – and further into the closet as an undocumented immigrant.

"When I came to Palm Springs 13 years ago, I just decided 'This is none of your business,' he says. "I have a different life here, and I never told anybody my status. Nothing, nothing."

When he began dating a new partner, Keith, six years ago, he eventually told him about his legal status, but he continued to keep his secret from everyone else.

"My friends think I am a citizen. I never discussed this with them," he says.

He still avoids travel and takes extra precautions every day. He doesn't speed, drink and drive, or go to areas known to have immigration raids.

"Because I love this country and I don't want [anything] to happen so they can take me out," he says. "I don't want anything, anything, to happen that I can be deported or I can be arrested for."

DOMA ruling brings new hope

All of that changed on June 26, when the Supreme Court announced that they had struck down part of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) and dismissed the case of California's Proposition 8.

DOMA denied federal benefits to legally married same-sex couples and Prop 8 prohibited gay marriages in California.

The ruling meant that Ceballos would be able to marry his partner Keith, who could now petition for him to get a green card.

"I was crying, I was not able to work good because I kept looking at my phone and looking at Facebook, reading everything," he recalls. By that time, his mother had moved to California, and was able to share in his excitement. "My mom was with me that day, she came and gave me a hug, and we started crying together. It is amazing, amazing."

That same morning, immediately after the Supreme Court decision was announced, Keith proposed to Ceballos. One week later, they were married at the Indio Courthouse.

Keith has since petitioned the U.S. Citizen and Immigration Services for his husband to be granted legal residency.

Several years ago, Ceballos had an opportunity to marry a close female friend but he declined. "For me, marriage is only with the person I love," he says.

With Keith, it was different. "We didn't marry just for [legalization]," he says. "We married because we are in love." Now, as he awaits his green card, he feels his dreams finally within reach.

"I just want to be free to drive, free to do what I want to, to make my goals, make my dreams come true," he says. "Because I have a lot of dreams."

Releasing the backpack

Ceballos says it is difficult to express his feelings about his two countries.

"I love my culture, I love to be Mexican, but I am proud and more in love with this country…because probably the things I have now never would happen in Mexico. I'm free to say 'gay.' I'm not free to do a lot of things, not yet. But if I was in Mexico I would not be free to be myself.

"My family is here, my nieces and nephews were born here, my three sisters and my mom are here. I hope I can stay here forever."

His immediate goal is to go back to school and get his real estate license so he can go into business with his partner, a realtor.

But until he has his green card in hand, Ceballos feels that he is still lugging around that same backpack he crossed the border with 21 years ago.

"I feel like [the backpack] on my shoulders probably weighs a couple hundred pounds and probably that day [when I get my green card], it will be off. And I will [be able] to fly or run."

One day he hopes to become a U.S. citizen. "The day it happens will be the second best day of my life," he says.

The best day? "Meeting the guy I married."

Additional reporting by Alejandra Alarcon.

This article was produced as part of New America Media's LGBT immigration reporting fellowship sponsored by the Four Freedoms Fund.

Environmental Pollution Gives Rise to Homegrown Activism

Ivan Delgado, Rogelio Montaño and Aurora Saldivar / Coachella Unincorporated

Ed. Note: The following profiles of community activists are part of a series examining environmental health conditions in the rural, unincorporated communities in Riverside County's Eastern Coachella Valley (ECV). The authors, Ivan Delgado, Rogelio Montaño and Aurora Saldivar, are youth reporters for Coachella Unincorporated, and residents of the ECV.

The Guevaras: Toxic Odor Awakens Father-Son Activism

By Ivan Delgado

Eduardo Guevara, Jr., spent many afternoons inside his family's apartment playing video games. While this sounds like normal behavior for an 11-year-old boy, his reason for doing so was anything but normal.

Junior said he preferred to stay indoors, rather than play outside, when the smell he described as "rotten eggs" festered in the air above the community of Mecca.

"We don't want to be the generation that ignored all the symptoms and all the problems that are going on."

More than two years have passed since mass dumping was halted at the Western Environmental facility in Mecca. Many residents believed that the odor that drifted across Mecca neighborhoods originated from Western, compromising the health of the community.

Although most of the dumping has ceased, the cleanup is not happening quickly enough for Junior and his parents, Claudia and Eduardo, Sr.

Claudia Guevara, 35, has developed severe asthma-related health issues in the five-plus years the family has lived in Mecca. Several years ago, when the odor seemed particularly strong, she was hospitalized.

"I Thought She Would Die"

"I was sad," said Junior, a sixth-grader at Mecca Elementary School. "I thought she was going to die."

Her hospitalization propelled Eduardo Guevara, Sr., 36, to become a major player in the movement for a cleaner Mecca. In April of 2012, he took his young son with him to a community meeting held by the South Coast Air Quality Management District at Saul Martinez Elementary School.

During the meeting, Junior wrote a letter and asked his father if he could read it out loud. He delivered his spur-of-the-moment speech to AQMD officials.

"I did not have time to be embarrassed," said Junior, whose parents describe him as a quiet person.

The letter was submitted to the AQMD, but his father kept a copy. In part, it reads, "I think that the government has to do something about the toxic things they throw in Mecca. I am worried for my mom."

Since then, the budding environmental activist has developed strong feelings about the presence of Western Environmental and other waste operations in the area.

"How hard is it to clean up?" Junior asked. "Why don't they just pack up their trash and go?"

It is unclear how many Mecca residents have had serious health problems due to air pollutants, but Eduardo Guevara, Sr., said he knows many people in the community who have been affected.

Junior, whose numerous academic achievement certificates cover a living room wall, hopes to be a policeman, fireman or soldier one day. In the meantime, he is focusing on spreading awareness regarding the environmental issues plaguing his hometown.

"Me and my dad are doing something for the community," he said. "So we both feel good."

Ivan Delgado's article first appeared in The Desert Sun.

Lilia Rebollar: 'Promotora' Fulfills Passion for Community Service

By Rogelio Montaño

When Lilia Rebollar came to the United States from Mexico, the only work the former nurse could find was in the agricultural fields of the Eastern Coachella Valley.

She spent the next several years as a field laborer and focusing on her duties as a wife and mother of three. But her desire to help others remained.

When her children were older, she found the perfect opportunity for community involvement in the newly formed parents' council at Desert Mirage High School. Now that her children are grown, the Oasis resident has found a new way to help the community.

Rebollar has become a promotora, a community-health promoter, for Clinicas de Salud in Coachella. In this role, it is her duty to learn about important environmental issues, from air pollution to pesticides, and share this knowledge directly with residents. Her current focus is educating herself and the community on arsenic contamination in the local water supply.

"This is the biggest problem we have right now," Rebollar said, in Spanish.

The other big problem is lack of awareness, which is why Rebollar says the work that promotoras do is crucial in the communities of the Eastern Coachella Valley.

Door-to-Door

"There is a need for promotoras, such as myself, because we take the information to the people," said Rebollar, who often delivers brochures and flyers door-to-door. "Sometimes they know they are ill, but they don't know the reason why, or where to turn for help."

Even though her children are out of the house, Rebollar's community involvement doesn't come without personal sacrifice.

"From my own experience, one of the obstacles we face as promotoras are our husbands," she said. "They don't accept it. They're the ones who are supposed to be out working, and we're supposed to stay at home."

Nonetheless, Rebollar said, now that she has the opportunity to follow her passion, she is not going to let it slip away.

"I enjoyed helping people as a nurse, but I had to leave that behind," she said. "Now that I have this opportunity, I want to do it the best I can."

"It's interesting to come back as an adult, as a tax-paying member of the community, as a professional," she said. "It's a growing opportunity for me as a person."

Living in Fear of the Outdoors

Cristina Mendez: Coming Back Home, to Make a Difference

By Aurora Saldivar

Although Cristina Mendez was raised in the Eastern Coachella Valley, she was unaware of the living conditions endured by many in her community.

"I didn't know about the substandard infrastructure problems that exist. I didn't know about environmental hazards like pesticides," said Mendez, 35. "I didn't really think about them, even though my mom was a farm worker."

Now she thinks about these issues every day and, as a community worker with California Rural Legal Assistance (CRLA), she is glad to be part of the solution. A large part of her job at CRLA is to raise awareness of environmental concerns in the area by educating residents, community groups, and government agencies.

"We don't want to be the generation that ignored all the symptoms and all the problems that are going on," Mendez explained.

Mendez first became interested in community service while working at a Latino bookstore when she was a student at California State University, San Bernardino. Books about social and political issues triggered her realization that she was part of a bigger world and was capable of making an impact.

She stayed in San Bernardino after completing her studies, working for the Catholic Diocese of San Bernardino and Inland Congregations United for Change before returning to Coachella. She jumped at the opportunity to make an impact in her hometown when she found out that CRLA was looking for a community worker.

One major concern in the community is that something in the air is going to cause cancer and make skin peel and bleed, which Mendez said scares many residents enough to keep them indoors.

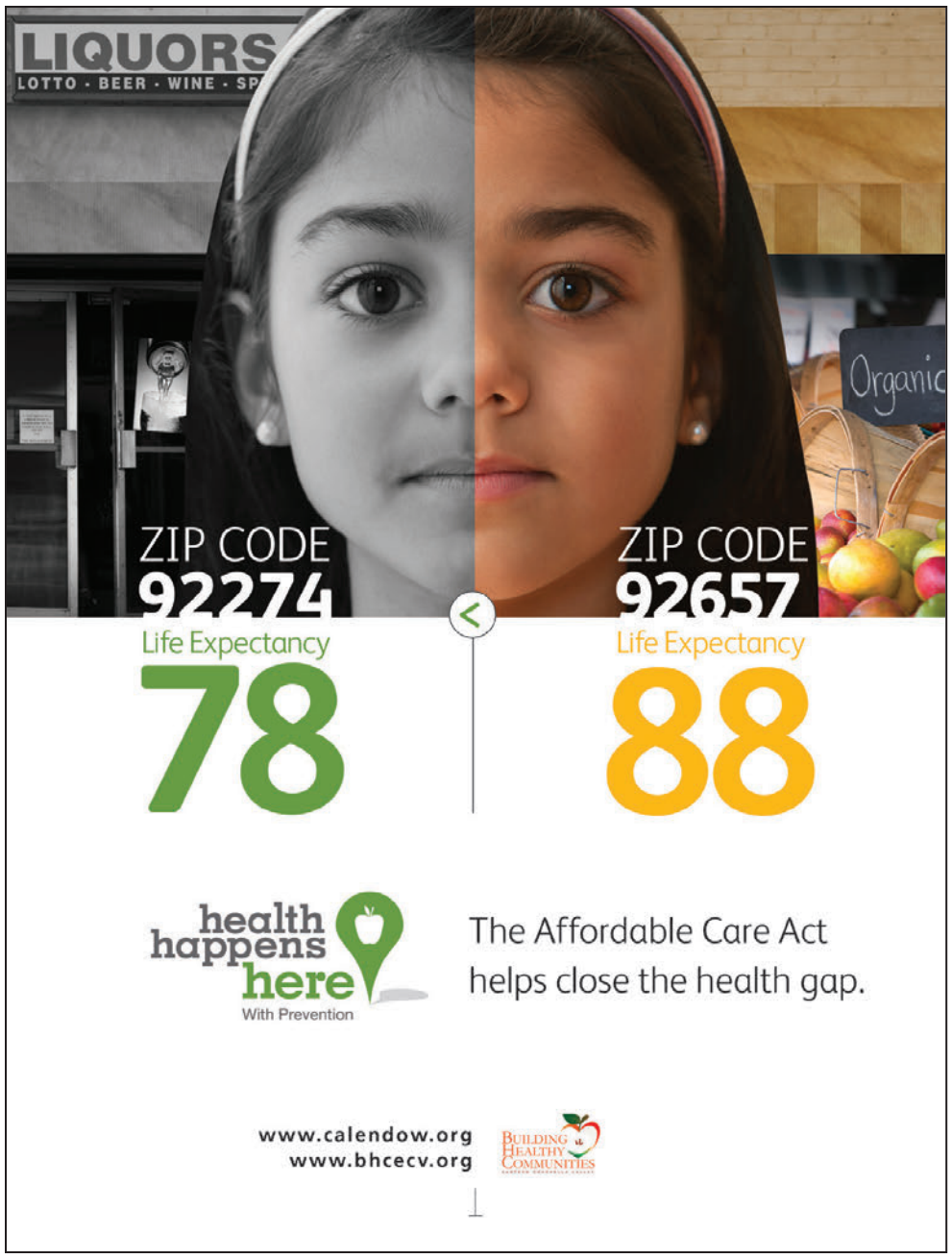
"When people are living with these types of concerns and nobody is there providing an answer or an explanation that is provided with respect, you are going to have a community that lives in fear," she said.

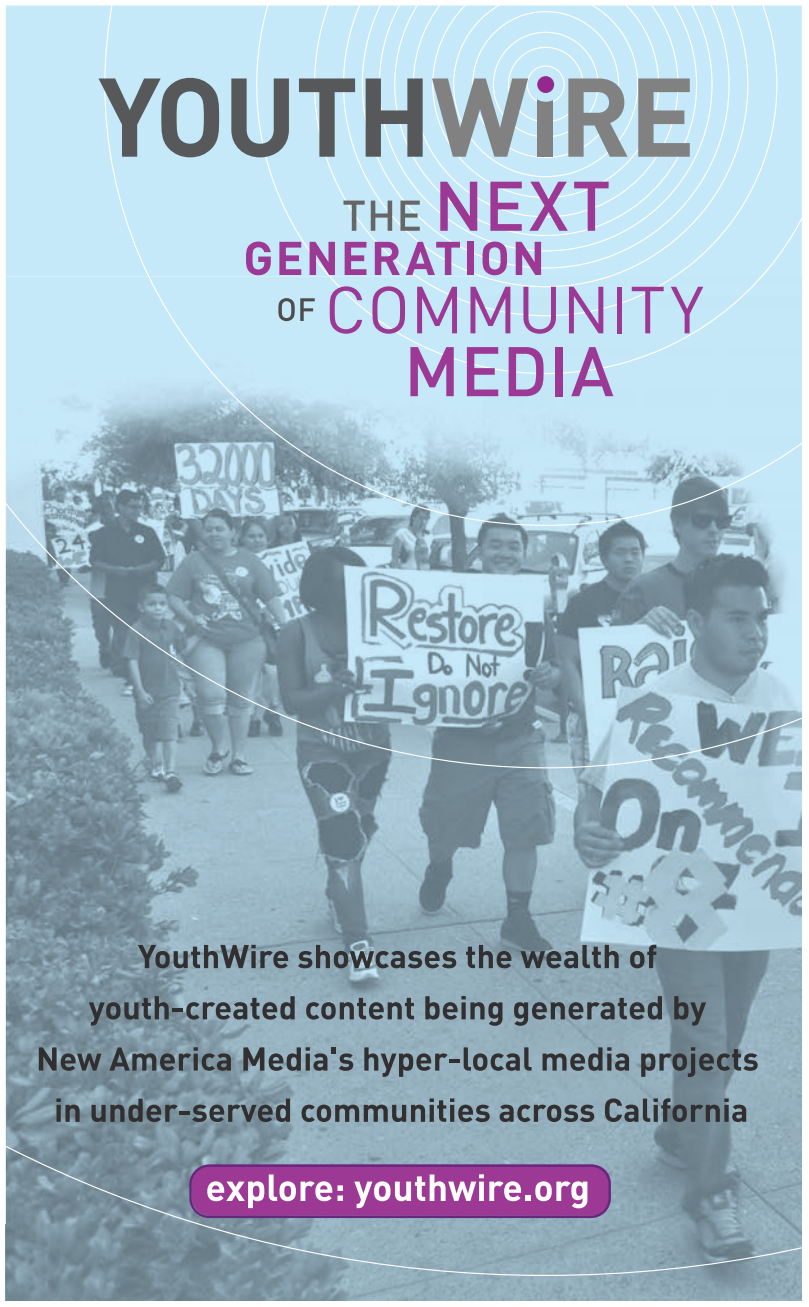
Mendez added that every step forward, no matter how small it may seem, is important to the cause of environmental justice.

"If somebody doesn't work for it, then we aren't going to obtain it," Mendez observed. "The little victories that I get to see are very rewarding and fulfilling."

In the several years since she has been back, Mendez said progress has been made toward achieving environmental justice for Eastern Coachella Valley residents, but the fight is far from over, and everyone can play a role.

"People think they have to be super heroes," she said. "But being an active community member doesn't mean that you save everybody. Simply asking questions and holding public officials accountable can help."





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