

Podcast: NIEHS Program Builds Careers, Changes Lives (Part II)

[Intro music]

Ashley Ahearn (Narrator): You're listening to Environmental Health Chat - a show from the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences that explores the connections between our health and our world.

I'm Ashley Ahearn.

In our previous episode we celebrated the 25th anniversary of the Environmental Career Worker Training Program with an interview with the program's director, Sharon Beard, and one of its first graduates, Martanaze Hancock.

Well, we're back with a sequel to that story. The program is designed to deliver health, safety, and job-specific training for people from marginalized communities. The goal is to get participants into careers in the environmental and construction industries.

But there are other success stories to be told about the program: Not all of its graduates have gone on to work in the environmental or construction industries. I'd like to introduce you to one woman who took a different path, that's also worth celebrating.

Mayor Lopez: My name is Rocio Treminio-Lopez, and you can call me, Mayor Lopez.

Ashley Ahearn: Rocio Treminio-Lopez was elected mayor of Brentwood, Maryland in 2015. The town of 3,400 people is just outside of Washington, D.C. More than half the residents are Hispanic. Mayor Lopez says leading this community is a lot of work. Her four kids aren't always happy with her long hours.

Mayor Lopez: But then they encourage me back and say: "No, mom, you're doing a great job and you should continue." Because it's a debate every two years, whether I run or not, because the elections here in a little town like Brentwood is every two years. So this is my third period that is ending on April 30, 2021. Meaning that I'm going to be running for re-election next May.

Ashley Ahearn: So do you get to hold the big scissors and do ribbon cuttings and things like that?

Mayor Lopez: All the ceremonial things that you can think of - yes.

Ashley Ahearn: [laughter] Do you like that part of your job?

Mayor Lopez: It's good. But you know, we coming from a background that we are hands on people. I like more to do the work than just be there for the picture.

Ashley Ahearn: Mayor Lopez came to the U.S. from El Salvador as an undocumented immigrant when she 14 years old. She graduated from high school and was living with her mother when she had her first child. She didn't have a job.

Then, she heard about the Alice Hamilton Occupational Health Center. It was one of the first centers to receive support from the NIEHS Environmental Career Worker Training Program. Treminio-Lopez remembers she was excited to hear that the Center was offering a training program in Spanish. Participants received five dollars per day for the training, which was a lot of money for her back then.

Mayor Lopez: But then it wasn't just, you know, about the money. It actually was about what I was learning through the program. So I started going, I got interested in everything that was taught there, the hands on, all the things were so engaging. It was like you don't want to miss a day because everything was so amazing, what they were doing, when you have to put on those suits and you have to learn about lead and asbestos.

Ashley Ahearn: The lessons about the hazards of lead and mold were particularly interesting to her, as a new mom. Mayor Lopez was worried about what her daughter might be exposed to in the affordable housing where they lived.

Mayor Lopez: My daughter was a very sick child when she was small, she had asthma. And that's another thing that you know, I had to understand, you know, what the conditions, the weather, the environment, everything that I was living on, it was affecting her health. So that's how, you know, I really got engaged in the program to know more.

Ashley Ahearn: Mayor Lopez completed the program in 1999 and then decided to take a job as a receptionist at the Alice Hamilton Occupational Health Center. She quickly moved up to an administrative role - coordinating programs, keeping schedules, and filing paperwork.

It was her first job ever – and a huge turning point in her life.

Mayor Lopez: Everything changed, you know, I was able to afford a vehicle, I was able to get my apartment, because I was living with my mom. So, it did mean a lot to me because it changed my life for good...After getting myself together, I was able to say you know what, I'm on my own, I am independent person, I will be able to provide for my child. So, I was able to, you know, start my life over.

Ashley Ahearn: As a Spanish speaker, Mayor Lopez was also an important part of the Center's ability to serve a more diverse group of participants.

After she left the Center, she went on to get her cosmetology license. Then she worked for a bank for a while, but she said those jobs didn't fulfill her the way her work at Alice Hamilton had.

Mayor Lopez: I always felt that I needed to help, I always felt that that I have that passion for serving others. And I remember working at Alice Hamilton, there was a lot of kids that were struggling. They went through the same thing as I went, they had issues at home, they had domestic violence, they had drug abuse.

Ashley Ahearn: Mayor Lopez saw herself in the people she was serving at Alice Hamilton. And she carried that commitment to service with her in her next job with a non-profit that provided home visits to young, first-time mothers.

Mayor Lopez: And usually they were young, too young, because I was 21 when I had my daughter, but these girls, they were like maybe 14-, 15-years-old. And I worked there for close to seven years.

Ashley Ahearn: She shared with the young girls what she learned at Alice Hamilton. She talked about lead, the environment, and the importance of protecting their health as young mothers, and the health of their children. She said this work motivated her to take on a leadership role in her community.

Mayor Lopez: And that's how I got into politics, because I felt like you know, you need to be on the other side too. Because otherwise people are not listening.

Ashley Ahearn: The knowledge she gained through the Environmental Career Worker Training Program has made her a better mayor, she says. Through the program she learned about environmental justice and the disproportionate exposures low income and communities of color face when it comes to pollutants. As mayor, she thinks about how hazardous materials, like lead and asbestos, can affect the health and safety of her constituents – especially those who face economic challenges.

For her, being mayor is about service, not power.

Mayor Lopez: Even if I'm the mayor today or not, I still care about the people. I will still care about my seniors. I will still care about the single mom. I will still care about domestic violence. I will still care about environmental issues. I will still care that I want to improve my neighborhood. I want to improve my town because here's where I live. And at least you know if I cannot change the world, at least I can change this place where I live.

Ashley Ahearn: Mayor Lopez, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me today.

Mayor Lopez: Thank you, Ashley. And thank you so much for the time.

Ashley Ahearn: Rocio Treminio-Lopez has been the mayor of Brentwood, Maryland since 2015. She graduated from one of the first training programs offered in Spanish by the Alice Hamilton Occupational Health Center in 1999. The Center was one of the first organizations funded by the NIEHS Environmental Career Worker Training Program.

I'm Ashley Ahearn. Thanks for listening to Environmental Health Chat.

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