

# Rose Foundation for Communities and the Environment, New Voices are Rising—Youth Creating Environmentally Just Communities

*An Environmental Justice Grant Success Story*

## Project Overview

The New Voices Are Rising grants program serves high school students from low-income communities of color in Oakland and Richmond, California.

## The Community

The community focus of the project, funded by a \$25,000 [EJ Small Grant](#) from the Environmental Protection Agency, was on high school youth in the cities of Oakland and Richmond. Located in the Bay Area of California, Oakland and Richmond are home to some of the most active goods movement facilities and refineries in the state.

Facilities operating within these cities include the Port of Oakland (4<sup>th</sup> busiest container port in the United States), the Port of Richmond, Union Pacific Rail yard (in Oakland), BNSF Rail Yard (in Richmond), Chevron Richmond oil refinery, a major U.S. Postal Service

distribution center, and – the trucks, trains, and ships that serve them.

The pollution which is generated from these heavy emitting industries has disproportionately impacted the health and wellbeing of residents living within the vicinity of these facilities.

Despite these environmental hardships, Oakland and Richmond’s disadvantaged communities maintain a strong culture of involvement and activism.

“During the program, I have enhanced my awareness on the whole concept of environmental justice. I did not know many things about the whole problem we face because the environmental effects of goods movement industry is only the outside shell. I have now become aware of the impacts the goods industry has on the community.”

Student, Class of 2010



New Voices student, Segun B. speaks at the California Air Resource Board hearing.

## Project Description

With the support of the EJ small grant, the Rose Foundation funded a summer program that worked with 16 students attending the Oakland and Richmond public school system.

The intensive 5-week program consists of a mix of classroom trainings, field trips, and group discussions designed to introduce students to the concepts of environmental justice. Students learned about the federal, state, and local roles in developing laws and regulations that affect climate change, air pollution, and community health.

Furthermore, students learn key analytical tools and public speaking skills, which will enable them to participate effectively in public efforts to improve air quality. Enhancing public participation among participating high school students will help The Rose Foundation foster a new generation of environmental health leaders in the underrepresented communities of Richmond and Oakland.

## The Results

The Rose Foundations' New Voices Are Rising – Youth Creating Environmentally Just Communities Project achieved numerous milestones. Through the intensive 5-week summer program, students explored environmental justice issues in connection to goods movement and oil refining, worked with local community-based organizations, attended field trips to the Port of Oakland and the Richmond Chevron refinery, and toured the Literacy for Environmental Justice Eco-Center in Bayview Hunters Point.

The highpoint of the program occurred when students presented reports on their work to the Bay Area Air Quality Management District. During this meeting, students called on the Board to adopt and support policies that advance climate protection and improve air quality. Students recommended the Board strengthen oil refinery regulations, support statewide diesel reduction rules, and encouraged relevant agencies to move truck routes away from vulnerable residential areas.

Because of this experience, 13 students plan to continue working on environmental justice issues during the upcoming school year.

## Reflection

Due to time limitations in the classroom, New Voices was not able to gauge student's comprehension of environmental justice concepts with planned exam exercises. Staff anticipated that this would affect students' understanding of the links between diesel pollution exposure and asthma. However, testimony from students during the California Air Resource Board, Bay Area Air Quality Management District and Port Commission meetings revealed quite the opposite.

Students were able to articulate their own recommendations for air quality and climate protection to Board members. One such recommendation included developing a program that provides financial assistance to Port of Oakland truckers who cannot afford to replace or retrofit older engines with newer low-emission engines.

## Opening of New Doors

The successful outcome of the New Voices Are Rising – Youth Creating Environmentally Just Communities grant has enabled the Rose Foundation to take part in new educational opportunities. Recently, students and teachers from Mandela High School have expressed interest to New Voices about developing a roof top water collection and storage system for the school. The school views this project as being a great learning tool to introduce youth to the practices of urban water conservation.



New Voices students tour the Literacy for Environmental Justice Eco Center in Bay View Hunters Point.

Once the proposed project moves forward, New Voices staff has agreed to provide students with guidance to design and develop this type of water system. It is the hope of New Voices staff to be able to replicate this project at many other schools throughout the Oakland and Richmond area.

## Up Next For New Voices are Rising



Youth Creating Environmentally Just Communities EJ mapping project.

Although EPA funding for this EJ Small Grant project has concluded, the Rose Foundation's New Voices Are Rising Program has expanded its summer 2011 curriculum to introduce students to the topics of Community Planning and Climate Change. Through this new curriculum, students will visit local neighborhoods slated for redevelopment and meet with community members, planners, scientists, and activists so that they may develop their own solutions to address the challenges of redeveloping the urban core while reducing residents' exposure to harmful carcinogens. As a final project, students will present their vision to the Metropolitan Transportation Commission and Association of Bay Area Governments, two agencies who are leading the Sustainable

Communities Strategy planning process.

## NEW VOICES ARE RISING KEY RESULTS

- The program introduced students to the concept of health inequality and environmental justice.
- Engaged students in real world policy debates and pending health issues that disproportionately affect low-income communities and communities of color.
- Students interned with community based non-profits and governmental offices that are engaged in efforts to improve air quality.
- The program introduced students to the concept of health inequality and environmental justice.
- Students developed and reported their own air quality and climate protection recommendations to policy makers at BAAQMD.
- Thirteen of the fifteen students who completed the program expressed a desire to continue working on environmental or environmental justice issues this upcoming school year.

To learn more about New Voices Are Rising – Youth Creating Environmentally Just Communities, please visit Rose Foundation for Communities and the Environment or contact Jill Ratner, Program Director for New Voices Are Rising, at (510) 658-0702 ext. 306, or [jratner@rosefdn.org](mailto:jratner@rosefdn.org).