

Engaging low-income communities in the fight for environmental justice

A nonprofit poverty-fighting agency leads the way in Seattle to meld environmentalism with social activism

By Mark Okazaki
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I came from the old school of civil rights activists who believed that we need to feed our children and house the homeless before we worried about the environment. Racial inequality and discrimination were more pernicious than air pollution. Access to health care and job training was a priority that came before the treatment of rain water.

Today, as executive director of a 101-year-old Seattle nonprofit, Neighborhood House, which serves largely immigrant and refugee families living in public housing, my world view has expanded. And so has the mission of Neighborhood House. Now, we understand that the policies and practices that fail to address critical environmental issues are the same ones that perpetuate poverty and racial injustice.

From rising energy costs that can force struggling families to choose between feeding their kids and heating their home, to the policies that failed the poor during Hurricane Katrina, the fight for environmental justice is taking its deserved place along side the fight for social justice.

As more and more human service providers like Neighborhood House recognize this link and embrace environmentalism with social activism, we are poised to be much more than service providers. We can be catalysts for real change. The prospect is, at once, exhilarating and overwhelming. And the challenges grow when we deal with populations for whom energy conservation and environmental stewardship seem at odds with the American dream.

Picture the Somali family who had to carry water on their backs two miles from the river to their home. They arrive in America where water is plentiful and clean and comes right into their house with the twist of a wrist. Or the couple from Kazakstan who came close to freezing to death each winter, now living in a Seattle apartment where they can turn on the heat anytime they feel a chill.

How do we teach these families about conservation? How do we convince them that being an environmental steward is a responsibility just like being a parent, a wage-earner, a voter?

At Neighborhood House, we are rising to this challenge in a unique way. First, we have made a small but significant change in our mission statement, adding the word “health”:

Neighborhood House helps diverse communities of people with limited resources attain their goals for self-sufficiency, financial independence, health and community building.

Second, we are delivering on that mission not just by helping families gain the skills and confidence they need to be self sufficient or by helping them address specific health issues like asthma, AIDS/HIV prevention and dental care, but by walking our talk when it comes to the environment. Neighborhood House is building one of the first LEED™ gold-certified buildings in the nation to be located in a low-income community with the sole purpose of serving those low-income residents. LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) gold certification represents one of the highest standards of environmental design and sustainability as designated by the U.S. Green Building Council.

The Neighborhood House High Point Neighborhood Center, located in a public housing community in West Seattle, will consume half the energy of a similarly sized building using high-efficiency windows, ground source heating and cooling, and solar panels; collect rain water from the roof and reuse it for irrigation; and, be constructed with environmentally-friendly building materials that help maintain carbon balance, reduce the introduction of toxins into the ecosystem, and maintain natural biodiversity and existing ecosystems.

Yes, it will cost more to build green. But we believe the donors who will be asked to fund the project will consider it well worth the cost. And the High Point Neighborhood Center won't just be built green, the building itself will be a green teaching tool. It is the Center's unique role as a learning laboratory that gives us the most hope of engaging low-income individuals, immigrants and refugees in an environmental awareness and activism that can help change our community and our world.

One of the educational features of the building will be a series of interactive, multi-media kiosks where visitors can use touch screens to view the personal stories of High Point families along with their native country's culture and approaches to recycling, conservation, energy use, pollution and other environmental issues. In one place, people will experience state-of-the-art ecological advances while learning about other cultures' environmental efforts.

Teens from the High Point neighborhood will be trained to guide people through the building and explain its sustainable features. We will also ensure that staff, volunteers and even the clients who come to the Neighborhood Center for job training and other services will be knowledgeable about the building's green elements.

A walking tour will bridge the building to the community that surrounds it, taking people on an educational walk through nearby parks, creeks and ponds. We envision families spending a day at the Center, engaged with their neighbors and each other in indoor and outdoor activities that spark their enthusiasm for being environmental advocates.

Because so many immigrant families return to their home countries to visit, we hope they will bring with them what they learn here about environmental sustainability. And changing the world becomes more than just a dream, it is a real possibility.

With groundbreaking still several months away, these ideas for an environmental and cultural learning space are still in their infancy. We hope others will lend their thoughts to our efforts as the project moves forward.

Social justice, racial justice, environmental justice, cultural understanding – all are interwoven. But in this nation, low-income and ethnic communities are too often left out of policy considerations and disproportionately suffer the consequences of environmental degradation. We hope Neighborhood House can serve as a role model for engaging and energizing low-income communities, not just to bring themselves up and out of poverty but to effect permanent solutions to worldwide environmental issues that contribute to our environment.