

# A Healthy Home is a Happy Home

Meet four mothers working to improve their community environment

A healthy home means a happy home, especially when young children are involved. Because their nervous and immune systems are not yet fully developed, babies, toddlers and preschoolers are more susceptible to environmental toxins. That's why home hazards like lead poisoning are especially damaging to children under age 6. Four local mothers—Maria Martinez, Silvia León, Joaquina Hernandez and Jennifer Cooper—are very aware of these facts. So much so, that they work throughout their communities to change the status quo and improve their neighborhoods.



Maria Martinez

## Healthier Environment

Children breathe more air, eat more and drink more for their size compared to adults. As a result, young people are taking in more environmental pollutants relative to their body weights, according to the Environmental Health Coalition (EHC), a National City nonprofit organization dedicated to achieving environmental and social justice.

**Maria Martinez** became concerned about air and water quality after her then 10-year-old son Francisco was diagnosed with asthma.

"I learned that pollution was the main cause of his asthma, so I became active in making changes to reduce pollution in Barrio Logan," Martinez says. Her neighborhood is dotted with auto repair and paint shops, furniture manufacturing, chrome plating shops, distribution centers, welding shops, chemical tank cleaning shops and chemical distribution centers that store gases and chemical barrels outdoors.

"A mixture of toxic emissions from all the different chemicals used in their daily operations,

combined with heavy truck traffic with diesel emissions lowered our neighborhood air quality," she says.

Parents like Martinez know that toddlers are more likely to put fingers and foreign objects into their mouths, increasing their chances of oral ingestion of environmental toxins. Kids tend to breathe more through their mouths rather than their noses, thereby taking in more unfiltered air. They are also nearer to the ground, where many types of heavier-than-air vapors and dusts collect. And since children have more skin surface relative to their body weights, they will absorb comparatively more substances that can penetrate skin.

Because of the efforts of Martinez and fellow residents, the San Diego City Council approved a new community plan to make the community a healthier place to raise their families. Francisco, now 16 and his brothers, Jonathan, 12 and Marcos, 7, benefit from their mother's tireless advocacy.

Martinez encourages residents to be part of the solution by participating in making changes that benefit their neighborhood.

"If you choose to just complain and not act, nothing is going to change," Martinez says, "so I've learned to voice my concerns to the people with decision-making power, and I'm upfront with them about our goals for the neighborhood."



## Meet our Cover Mom, Jennifer Cooper!

By Jessica Baldis

San Diego entrepreneur Jennifer Cooper is a mom of three (Kyrie, 2, Jahsae, 3, and Olivia, 15) and co-founder of Green Your Air—a company dedicated to nurturing a healthy environment for kids by promoting air-filtering plants. It offers an assortment of plants that filter harmful chemicals and toxins from the air in fun, eco-friendly pots. Jennifer explains that the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) rates indoor air pollution as one of the top five threats to public health. But, she says “there are a variety of ways you can change your indoor environment to make it healthier, and one of them is adding more plants.”

One of Jennifer's favorite air purifying plants is Fortis, which filters formaldehyde from the air. Formaldehyde is a chemical often found indoors in paint, upholstery, carpet and furniture glue. Jennifer recommends the Fortis for just about anyone because “it's really great for people with a ‘black thumb.’ People who aren't good at taking care of plants can have this plant, have greenery in their home, and filter the air!”

What advice does Jennifer have for other moms who might be interested in starting a business? She says, “If you just start telling people, close friends and family, ‘this is my idea’ and show them that you're passionate about it ... you'll learn that within your own community you have tons of people that will be there to support you.”

Check out [www.greenyourair.net](http://www.greenyourair.net) to learn more about Jennifer and Green Your Air.

## Saving Energy

Raised in Sherman Heights, **Silvia León**, a longtime community activist, took another trail toward making her community better. The mother of 10-year-old Ruben and 7-year-old Omar is involved in the EHC's Healthy Kids Campaign. Through funding from National City's Community Development Block Grant Program and the California Center for Sustainable Energy, León makes free educational visits to homes in San Diego and National City. Toting her homemade energy saving kits

containing efficient light bulbs, a shower timer and refrigerator thermometers, León's goal is to teach families how to be more energy efficient. She explains how to read and comprehend energy meters and bills, offers customized room-by-room energy savings action plans and tracks energy and gas consumption.

“By showing consumers simple techniques, and providing low-tech tools

like CFL bulbs and smart power strips, they can help reduce energy and gas usage and lower bills without upfront costs,” adds León. The peer-to-peer education method she uses empowers families in disadvantaged communities to understand the connection between their energy use and the pollution coming from power plants. These ongoing financial savings free up funds for families to spend on other necessities, according to León. “Small changes to our daily habits have huge impacts on our health and the environment, meaning fewer power plants, cleaner air and fewer children with asthma. This gives me hope for our future,” she says.

León grew up with a passion to make a difference in her neighborhood. “It came from my mom and dad,” she says. “Their goal was to involve me and my sibling when we were young. They took every chance they could to expose us to the needs of the community.” León has passed that legacy on to her sons. “Now my children tag along to clean up neighborhoods, pick up trash or work on some other community activity,” she says. “My sons know I talk to people to help them make their homes safer. When we're driving around, they will even point out a home that has lead. I feel good about that because I know my boys recognize the difference and will make others aware of the danger.



Silvia León with her family