

Environmental organization empowers family, community

By Pablo Jaime Sáinz

In August of 2010, Patricia Saenz learned about the Environmental Health Coalition (EHC) when her rental house in City Heights tested positive for lead.

The non-profit organization headquartered in National City helped her begin the lead abatement through a program funded by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

When EHC Lead Specialist Luz Palomino came to Saenz' house for the initial testing, Saenz said she asked her about the link between lead and autism. Saenz' daughter, Sofia, was diagnosed with autism from an early age. Her core deficit is speech delay.

Saenz said that Palomino told her that based on her experience, about 50 percent of the houses that test positive for lead, have a child that presents developmental delays.

"At that moment I knew I felt the call to do something," Saenz said. "I needed to get the word out."

Sofia turned 5 years old in October, and is attending mainstream Kindergarten. Although Saenz said she has no idea what caused Sofia to have autism, she knows that environmental factors are some of the triggers mentioned as a cause for the condition.

"All of the sudden it wasn't just her helping me fix the problem in my house, it was much more than that. It was the children in my community being affected," Saenz said. "I decided to get involved with EHC because of a dream of wanting a safe and healthy environment for my daughter to grow up in that turned into wanting that same dream for all children in San Diego."

She remained in contact with Palomino, and this year Saenz is one of the recent graduates of SALTA (Salud Ambiental

Lideres Tomando Accion), a 9-week course, held on one night of the week for 3 hours. Students comprised different teams from neighborhoods spanning from National City, Sherman Heights, Barrio Logan, Chula Vista, and City Heights.

SALTA is a leadership empowerment program, according to Saenz.

"We learned the history of EHC and the meaning of environmental and social justice; the right to live, work, and play, in a clean and safe environment," she explained.

"We learned how to organize ourselves as leaders for our communities and how to give public testimony on things we feel are important. We learned that our individual voice is important and even louder as family of like minded leaders."

A special graduation ceremony was held at the end of the course in which students celebrated with their families.

Since her initial contact with



Patricia Saenz with her sweet daughter Sofia.

EHC, Saenz said that not only her family's health has improved because the asbestos were removed, but also that she has become a true member of her community.

"I've begun to connect more with my neighbors and organizations in my community of City Heights. I've made an effort to volunteer and know what's happening around me on a different level.

Saenz said that it was because of everything that she learned during the SALTA program that she decided to run in the elections for the Project Area Committee (PAC) for City Heights in October. She was voted on to the committee and will begin her two-year term in January.

Saenz' leadership story is being used as an example of the

positive impact the Environmental Health Coalition has in the community as part of its end-of-year fundraising campaign. The organization depends on donations to develop and maintain programs.

Now that Saenz' SALTA class is over, City Heights residents that took the class meet once a month to continue focusing on what they feel they would like to see changed in the neighborhood.

"We invite anyone who would like to learn more about environmental justice to join us and hear their concerns and dreams for a healthier community," she said.

Saenz and her husband grew up in City Heights, going to church there, and attending the local schools. She said that since they are raising their

daughter there it only makes sense to get involved and give back for the sake of the kids who live there.

"It takes dedication and meaningful collaborative effort to create the healthy environment that I envision and EHC has already proven they know how to embrace those who share the vision," Saenz said. "For over 30 years EHC has changed the lives of many by cleaning up toxic sites and educating the public. Their history holds stories of victory for people in the Tijuana and San Diego region. EHC helps empower people, organize communities and achieve justice."

To learn more about the Environmental Health Coalition, or to make a donation, please visit www.environmentalhealth.org.

Organización del medio ambiente empodera a comunidad



De izquierda a derecha: Sergio Gonzalez, Sofia Gonzalez, Patricia Saenz, Luz Palomino, Francisca Jimenez y Martha Cortes.

Por Pablo Jaime Sáinz

En agosto del 2010, Patricia Saenz conoció a la Environmental Health Coalition (EHC) cuando la casa que rentaba en City Heights salió positiva en una prueba de plomo.

La organización sin fines de lucro con sede en National City le ayudó a iniciar el programa de retiro de plomo a través de un programa con fondos del Departamento de Vivienda y Desarrollo Urbano.

Cuando la especialista en plomo de EHC, Luz Palomino, vino a la casa de Saenz para hacer la prueba inicial, Saenz dijo que le preguntó acerca de la relación entre el plomo y el autismo. La hija de Saenz, Sofia, fue diagnosticada con autismo a temprana edad. La niña tiene una deficiencia del habla.

Saenz dijo que Palomino le informó que basada en su experiencia, cerca del 50 por ciento de las casas que tienen plomo, tienen un niño que presenta retrasos en su desarrollo.

"En ese momento supe que tenía que hacer algo", dijo Saenz. "Necesitaba pasar la voz".

Sofia cumplió 5 años en octubre y asiste al kinder. Aunque Saenz dijo que no tiene idea que causó que Sofia tenga autismo, sabe que factores en el medio ambiente son posibles causas para la enfermedad.

"Decidí involucrarme con EHC porque tengo el sueño de tener un medio ambiente seguro y saludable para que crezca mi hija y ahora ese sueño es el mismo para todos los niños en San Diego", dijo Saenz.

Ella se mantuvo en contacto con Palomino, y este año Saenz es una de las graduadas recientes de SALTA (Salud Ambiental Líderes Tomando Acción), un curso de nueve semanas que se reúne una noche a la semana por tres horas. Los estudiantes se

componen de diferentes equipos que vienen desde National City, Sherman Heights, Barrio Logan, Chula Vista y City Heights.

SALTA es un programa de empoderamiento para la comunidad, dijo Saenz.

"Aprendimos acerca de la historia de EHC y el significado de la justicia del medio ambiente y social; el derecho de vivir, trabajar y jugar en un ambiente limpio y seguro", explicó.

Saenz dijo que gracias a todo lo que aprendió durante SALTA que decidió postularse para las elecciones del Comité de Proyectos de Área de City Heights en octubre. Ella fue electa y comenzará su periodo de dos años en enero.

La historia de liderazgo de

Saenz está siendo usada como un ejemplo del impacto positivo que Environmental Health Coalition tiene en la comunidad como parte de su campaña de recaudación de fondos de fin de año. La organización depende de donativos para desarrollar y mantener sus programas.

"Se necesita dedicación y esfuerzo en conjunto para crear el ambiente saludable que me imagino y EHC ha comprobado que saben apoyar a los que comparten esa visión", dijo Saenz. "EHC ha cambiado las vidas de tantas personas al limpiar lugares tóxicos y al educar al público".

Para conocer más acerca de la Environmental Health Coalition o para hacer un donativo, por favor visite www.environmentalhealth.org.

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