



Y. Armando Nieto (1951-Present)

Executive Director
Community Food and Justice Coalition

"Do not settle for crumbs; hold our leaders accountable." Y. Armando Nieto, 2005.

Overview

Armando Nieto is the executive director of the Community Food and Justice Coalition in Oakland, California, president of the Tulare County Community Water Center. Nieto has served on several boards including: the National Earth Share Federation, the Santa Barbara ChannelKeeper, and is founding president of the Community Water Center in Tulare County. He has also given service on the advisory boards of the Rose Foundation for Communities and the Environment, the National Conference for Community and Justice, the PG&E ClimateSmart Project, and CAUSE. Nieto is also a member of Hispanics in Philanthropy and the National Alliance of Hispanics in Health. During his career, Nieto has been able to develop expertise in fundraising and coalition building. He is proud that he has survived to become one of the respected elders in the field. Nieto considers Hispanics in Philanthropy to be one of the most effective networking groups in the country. It has become more diverse over the years and has allowed him to grow and to mentor others in the organization. Nieto was recruited by the Coalition for Clean Air (CCA) when the organization received funding from the William and Flora Hewlett foundation to aid in building the environmental movement in California.

This interview was conducted in 2015.

Early Life and Career

Y. Armando Nieto and his three brothers and one sister were born in Long Beach, California. Nieto's father was a construction worker and his mother an activist. His mother worked for Cesar Chavez for a time and opened a house of sanctuary for Salvadorian refugees. Having grown up on the coast of California, he saw oil development change the landscape of the shoreline and has been fighting drilling off the California coast ever since. "Growing up I was the president of everything in school; that and the Vietnam War influenced me," he says. Nieto, it seems, was destined to be an environmental and social justice activist.

Nieto began an undergraduate career at the University of California at Santa Barbara in 1969. However, after being unjustly beaten and jailed following anti-war protests and a fire at the Bank of America, Nieto was "turned off" from school. Despite not finishing his formal education, Nieto continued to develop as an activist, and went on to accomplish a great deal. Eventually, he and others individuals who were wrongfully accused of arson negotiated a settlement for the sum of \$100,000. The group used the money to found an organization called the Isla Vista Community Service Center. The Center served as a point for disseminating information and as a community-gathering place.

Nieto saw the environmental movement as a way to highlight social justice and equity concerns. “The environmental movement is a way to reach a broader group of people on social justice issues,” he says. He first became active in the environmental affairs in 1995 when he joined the staff of the Environmental Defense Center, a central coast public interest law firm, as Executive Director.

During his career, Nieto developed expertise in fundraising, organizational development, and coalition building. He is proud that he has survived to become one of the most respected elders in the field; “there now exists, and is accepted, a mediocre level of leadership, people have it [the desire to be a good leader] beaten out of them,” Nieto says. He says that he feels heartbreak when he becomes acquainted with people who are not willing to believe in themselves and are not willing to move forward. Nieto has served on several boards including: the National Earth Share Federation, the Santa Barbara ChannelKeeper, and is founding president of the Community Water Center in Tulare County. He has also given service on the advisory boards of the Rose Foundation for Communities and the Environment, the National Conference for Community and Justice, the PG&E ClimateSmart Project, and CAUSE. Nieto is a member of Hispanics in Philanthropy and the National Alliance of Hispanics in Health.

Contributions

Nieto considers Hispanics in Philanthropy to be one of the most effective networking groups in the country. It has become more diverse over the years and has allowed him to grow and to mentor others in the organization and to develop long term relationships. Nieto was recruited by the Coalition for Clean Air (CCA) when the organization received funding from the William and Flora Hewlett foundation to aid in building the environmental movement in California. He was charged with bridging non-traditional communities throughout the state and, as Director of Outreach, Communication and Community Engagement. Nieto says, “Many times, I am the money guy.”

Since working with CCA, he has served as executive director of Eagle Eye Institute, C.E.O. of Redefining Progress, managing director of the Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment, and executive director of the Community Food and Justice Coalition.

Nieto says that two overarching dynamics in this country are not about demographics but are the paradigm of the white male and of the economy. He says that the current paradigm is “dying hard.” He also says that because there is not enough money in [government] budgets, there is not enough money for social services. “The reality is that the country is made up of [large numbers of] people of color and we as a... [group] do not know how to work together well enough to shift the balance of power,” Nieto says. He continues, “I have come to be a bridge builder.” Nieto helps educate the community on the environmental, climate change, social justice, and economic issues that face them and aids in their campaign(s) of change.

Advice to Young Professionals

He provides this advice to those growing the movement; “Do not settle for crumbs, no matter what path you have taken. Higher education or not, you can be both successful and a role model.”

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