



Marina Ortiz (1958-Founder)

Founder

East Harlem Preservation

“Working in the environmental field is a way to make a contribution and difference.” Marina Ortiz

Overview

Born and raised in East Harlem/El Barrio and the South Bronx, Marina Ortiz has drawn from her experience as a stateside Puerto Rican woman to craft a versatile body of work that includes broadcast, print, and web journalism, photography, spoken word, poetry, and other forms of cultural and political expression – with an emphasis on justice and liberation.

This interview was conducted in 2010.

Early Life and Education

Marina Ortiz was born and raised in East Harlem, the same community where she currently lives and works. Both sides of her family have unusually high rates of cancer and she relates this to the environment and health care inequities. Further, there is a history of environmental experimentation and pollution in her family’s native country, Puerto Rico. While growing up she did not always know how or why or what could be done to help her family or community, she now dedicates herself to disseminating information that addresses issues of environmental health and justice to residents of East Harlem.

Ortiz earned a bachelor’s degree in media communications from the City University of New York, Hunter College in 1986. Ortiz has always loved to write. “I have always been writing, producing, publishing,” she says. Throughout her career, she has written and edited articles for numerous community-based publications and organizations and hosted and coproduced radio programs, including a weekly program focused on women’s and Latina issues. More recently, she has incorporated video work into her portfolio. “I have produced several short documentaries on East Harlem issues,” she says. Through her work, she has been able to present information on urban affairs, Latina life issues and environmental issues. Ortiz notes that she has generally worked with alternative and progressive media. Further, her work has focused on creating content for a community-based audience.

Career

Wanting to be a part of the changes and community-based planning processes that were occurring in East Harlem, Ortiz decided to relocate back to East Harlem in 2004. Since returning, she has learned that gentrification is not the only issue facing the community. The privatization of parklands, asthma, large-scale development, and lead poisoning, among others, are all issues facing the East Harlem community. To serve the community by using her communication skills, Ortiz founded East Harlem Preservation (EHP) in 2005.

EHP is an organization focused on serving as a community watchdog and information clearinghouse for issues related to gentrification and environmental justice. They provide the space and information for the general public to learn about the issues that are affecting the East Harlem community.

As part of its work, EHP hosts walking tours of the community for students and other interested groups and individuals. The tours are designed to help dispel stereotypes and highlight positive attributes of the community. Further, the tours may be organized around specific themes, such as outdoor artwork or architecture. In addition, the organization always strives to meet any community need. "There is always something new that is developing. We are constantly responding to what is going on in the community," says Ortiz.

Through her tours, lectures and interviews, Ortiz is able to share her experiences and knowledge. She cites the opportunities to lead students and educators on tours of her community and share her knowledge with others through media sources as the highlights of her career. "I can help create better awareness of what our community is in terms of problems and contributions. That is really rewarding. I think that there is a lot of community recognition and appreciation of the work that we do: work that is not being done by any other agency...A lot of media reach out to us when there is an issue in the community. These are measures that we are doing our work the right way," she says.

With the work that needs to be done constantly changing, Ortiz has found that having multiple skills and a willingness to develop new talent is important. "I am very self-taught," she says. She learns the skills necessary to get the work done. For Ortiz, this has included learning basic web design and html, photography and video editing. She is quick to point out though that friends, colleagues and partnerships have facilitated her learning.

Importance of Mentoring to Career

Ortiz's work has been supported by numerous mentors who have shared their knowledge and expertise. She credits the staff and leadership of local organizations and media, including West Harlem Environmental Action, New York City Park Advocates, Friends of Brook Park, Nos Quedamos, and the Manhattan public access television station, with helping her advance her environmental and advocacy work.

Taking a stand for the issues she believes in has not always been easy. Ortiz recalls how there have been times that she and her allies have been harassed, "We've ruffled some feathers and even made some

enemies because we refuse to compromise... Some people have even called organizations that we work with to create trouble.” As environmental issues become more pressing and the national culture is still resistant to making the necessary changes to live more sustainably, Ortiz continues this important work.

Advice to Young Professionals

To those interested in pursuing an environmental career, Ortiz says, “Advocating for environmental justice is a way to make a contribution and a difference.” But she also advises that more room needs to be made for people of color in the forefront of the movement. “The environmental movement needs to provide room for people of color at the forefront of planning: communities of color and poor and working neighborhoods that have traditionally served as dumping grounds. The brownfields are here and while we may not be experts or have the highest letters, we are directly affected and must be included,” she says.