



Kimberly Wasserman-Nieto (1976-Present)

Coordinator

**Little Village Environmental Justice
Organization**

"Everyone has to be part of the process." Kimberly Wasserman.

Early Life

Kimberly Wasserman grew up in the Chicago neighborhood of Little Village, the same community where she currently lives and works, as the middle child of Lidia and Howard Wasserman. She credits her parents' activism and awareness of social justice issues as well as her fondness for spending time outdoors and witnessing the systematic environmental destruction that was occurring in her community with leading her to a career in the environmental field.

Career

Wasserman's first job as a computer teacher at the local boys and girls club serendipitously led her to the Little Village Environmental Justice Organization (LVEJO), where she is currently the coordinator. The Boys and Girls Club where Wasserman worked was located in the same building as the LVEJO offices. When the Boys and Girls Club was threatened with closure, the LVEJO coordinator volunteered to train her and help organize parents and young people to demonstrate to decision-makers that the organization is an asset to the community. With the help of the LVEJO coordinator, Wasserman hosted a meeting attended by the Chief Executive Officer of the Boys and Girls Club, 200 parents and 300 young people.

Before joining the staff of LVEJO, Wasserman volunteered with the organization. Her participation as a volunteer with the organization led to where she is now. She recalls one volunteer event in particular, "They had a community building weekend where they planted trees in the community. The idea was to get neighbors to come out and talk with each other. They used the tree planting as a tool to keep neighbors in communication with each other. Eleven years later, the trees are still there." When Wasserman became pregnant with her first child, the LVEJO coordinator offered her a position with LVEJO and suggested that she bring her baby to work with her every day.

Wasserman began her work with LVEJO as a part-time organizer, but eventually moved up to full time. While she was on maternity leave with her second child, the organization's coordinator left. Others submitted Wasserman's resume for the position on her behalf and when she returned from maternity leave, she was the newly appointed coordinator of LVEJO. As part of her current position, Wasserman is responsible for coordinating all LVEJO campaigns, ensuring that all leaders and bases are an active part of the campaign, and executing the campaign. She is also responsible for building the necessary relationships to ensure that the campaigns move forward.

Importance of Mentoring to Career

Wasserman cites her parents, community members and leaders of the environmental justice movement as important mentors. She says, "My parents were important mentors in regards to how they have raised their children and stayed true to their beliefs...They taught us how to be cognitive of what is happening without overwhelming us." She is amazed and encouraged by members of the community, "I am in awe of the men and women who have the courage and heart to leave their families behind to try to provide for them. They are often working two to three jobs to make ends meet and are still involved in improving the community, regardless that they were not born here or may not plan to stay. That says wonders about the people in the community." Finally, Wasserman is appreciative of the guidance offered by others within the environmental justice movement. "They are very open and willing to talk to funders and share resources," she says of other environmental justice leaders and organizers.

Just as she has benefited from the mentorship of her parents, peers and senior colleagues, Wasserman makes an effort to mentor others through formal and informal mechanisms. Foremost, she makes an effort to mentor her own children as her parents mentored her. She has raised three children through the organization, taking advantage of the organization's flexibility and willingness to allow and encourage parents to bring their children to work. "My kids will learn from watching their parents, watching what they do everyday. My 11 year-old has a better understanding of environmental justice and what I do because of this. They [my children] have been to conferences too." However, Wasserman is not only concerned about mentoring her own children, she also mentors other youth through the LVEJO's youth leadership group, "I think I have tried to take those kids who have a genuine interest in this work and teach them everything I know. There has to be someone who can take my place. I train them in grant writing, talking with officials, and public speaking. Without our youth and organizers, I am just one person. Everyone has to be part of the process." Being able to see that those she has worked with become amazing young people who truly understand what is happening on the ground and how the community is affected is a rewarding outcome of mentoring others.

Highlights

Empowering Little Village community members has been the highlight of Wasserman's career. "They [community members] have been able to realize they do not need politicians, that they have the skills and talents to take action on their own. One person says, 'We can fix it' and they do it." Building a sound organization of people that work well together towards the same goal has been her most significant achievement to date.

Challenges

While Wasserman has been able to empower community members, not all of the campaigns she has been involved with have been winnable. She cites this as the most challenging aspect of her work. "We have had

great leaders and great people doing great work, but the end result was not what we wanted...Environmental justice struggles come across this because you have so much working against it," she says. Further, she says it has been difficult to ensure that the movement is open and accessible to low-income and people of color and she has made a conscious effort to ensure that those who are most impacted are involved in the movement.

Despite the challenges, Wasserman has continued her work as an environmental justice advocate. When asked what has made her stay with a career in the environmental field, Wasserman responded, "My kids. I want to put as much into it as I can. I know that the struggle is going to continue. I want my kids to know what struggle looks like."

Advice to Young Professionals

To minorities who are considering a career in the environmental field, Wasserman advises, "We need to stop this come in and fix it attitude and better understand the culture in communities. They are not ignorant to what is happening. We need to pay tribute to their ideas in the work that we do."

This interview was conducted in 2015.