

Building a healthy community



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By [Lisa Deaderick \(/staff/lisa-deaderick/\)](#) | 6 a.m. Aug. 27, 2016



Luz Palomino — *Howard Lipin*

There were so many things Luz Palomino learned when she first became involved with the Environmental Health Coalition more than 20 years ago.

The organization focuses on environmental and social justice by working on protecting public health and the environment, and advocating for policies that clean up pollution, reverse discriminatory land use, and encourage sustainable energy.

Because Palomino loves learning and helping her community, the coalition's leadership program allowed her to share this information with her neighbors.

Today, she's one of the group's community organizers and takes the lead on the Healthy Kids program in Sherman Heights.

As a mother of four and grandmother of nine, this work is also personally important. Palomino, 60, lives in Sherman Heights with her husband, and her children also live in San Diego. She talks about the Healthy Kids program, energy efficiency tips, and non-toxic staples for cleaning one's home.

Q: How did you first become involved with Environmental Health Coalition?

A: In 1995, I took a SALTA Leadership training course with EHC. SALTA stands for Salud Ambiental Lideres Tomando Accion, translated to Environmental Health Leaders Taking Action. The program is an interactive leadership development curriculum that provides community leaders with skill-building training in community organizing, policy advocacy, building power, community health, environmental justice and effective communication.

Q: What kind of work did you start out doing for them?

A: I started as a health promoter and assisted community organizers with getting the word out about environmental health in Sherman Heights.

Q: What do you do now?

A: I work on EHC's Healthy Kids Campaign and specialize in the lead-poisoning prevention and healthy homes programs. The Healthy Kids Campaign works to reduce or eliminate environmental childhood health hazards and promote homes and communities that are safe, healthy, accessible and affordable. The healthy homes project helps families in low-income communities save on energy costs and make their homes healthier, and consequently more comfortable. The lead-poisoning prevention program educates these same communities about the dangers of lead poisoning.

Q: What happens during an energy assessment?

A: A home energy assessment is the first step to make a home more energy efficient. As part of the energy assessment, we evaluate a home's energy efficiency and work with residents and owners to make changes that help them use less energy and save money. These audits help families understand that every time they leave a light switch on or take a long hot shower, energy from polluting power sources is used. Once families make the connection that what they do in their homes impacts our environment, they know that their actions are not just saving money on their energy bill but saving our planet, protecting workers and improving our health.

Q: How do people initially respond to getting an assessment?

A: It's not hard to convince people to make simple changes in their home to protect the health of their families and themselves. Once I explain how easy it is, people are more than willing to participate.

Q: What has the feedback for this program been like?

A: The program is very well received. Even after we leave their homes, people will usually call EHC to get more information about what else they can do or how they can continue to be involved in our work.

Q: Why go door to door, as opposed to maybe providing pamphlets or information online?

A: Many families in our communities do not own or use a computer, so having information exclusively online leaves out a big population of people that could use our help. When you go door to door, you get to meet people face to face and can directly communicate how this program can work for their home.

Q: What are healthy home visits?

A: During a healthy home visit we talk about the basic principles of having a healthy home, including the use of nontoxic cleaning products and having proper ventilation. We recommend alternative cleaning products and provide a starter kit full of the essentials, like baking soda, vinegar, and spray bottles. We also talk about keeping their homes well ventilated and dry to prevent moisture that is also very toxic.

Q: Do the recommendations result in changes in the home?

A: Yes, very much so. Whether that is a basic swap for nontoxic cleaning products or assisting families in applying for programs that can provide home improvements, these recommendations change the way families in our communities keep their homes. These programs are especially beneficial to families with children with asthma and allergies — a problem that is much more prevalent in San Diego's low-income communities. The simple changes we teach can have a big impact on asthma and allergy relief.

Q: When you first started doing these assessments and visits, did you learn of things that you needed to change in your own home?

A: I could apply all of the tips to my own home. I found that I could also learn a lot from the residents I was speaking with. The issues they were having in their homes forced me to come up with creative solutions that could help them. One of the biggest changes I made was purchasing energy-saving appliances. They have a huge impact on your monthly energy bill.

Q: What would you recommend as staples for cleaning in the home?

A: You can safely clean most things with various combinations of water, soap, vinegar, baking soda and salt.

Q: What kinds of tips have you learned for energy efficiency in a home?

A: If you can't afford energy-saving appliances, you can still exercise energy-efficient practices like using natural light instead of lighting devices, opting for energy-saving bulbs and turning off appliances when they are not in use.

Q: Why are these programs important to you?

A: Everything I do goes back to protecting the health of our residents and the environment. If we teach them how to do it, they'll end up advocating for their own health and becoming leaders in their communities to empower others to do the same.

Q: What do you think these programs do for the community?

A: Simply put, these programs greatly improve the quality of life in our communities and share public knowledge about how people can take action, even just within their own homes, for the health of themselves, their families and their communities.

Q: What's been challenging about your work with the Environmental Health Coalition?

A: As a nonprofit organization, EHC relies on donors, grants, etc., to stay operational. The work we do is extremely important, but sometimes low funding makes it difficult to do everything we can to make our communities better.

Q: What is the best advice you've ever received?

A: To be honest with myself and with others.

Q: Describe your ideal San Diego weekend.

A: An ideal weekend for me is spending time helping people in my community with neighbors and family.

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