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A Targeted Message

Is environmentalism still a luxury of the elite? Not in south Los Angeles.

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Perhaps you've heard of Baldwin Hills. The southwestern district of Los Angeles has been called the multicultural Beverly Hills, and is the subject of a BET reality knockoff of MTV's "The Hills." It's also surrounded by more than 400 oil wells in a sector of Los Angeles that's consistently ranked the most-polluted region in the nation. Five years ago, Irma Muñoz watched as two of her closest friends and neighbors, both lifelong Baldwin Hills residents, fell ill. It was cancer—one colon and the other, breast—and within two months, both women, in their late 50s, were dead.

It hasn't been proved that the chemicals they'd inhaled over a lifetime in the region had anything to do with their deaths, but cancer is among the health risks warned to be associated with oilfield expansion in Baldwin Hills, according to a 2007 report from a division of the L.A. County Department of Regional Planning. And in Muñoz's mind, it couldn't have been any clearer. "A lot of people in my neighborhood have died of cancer, and I decided that women needed to start speaking up," says the Los Angeles native, a lifelong activist. In 2004, Muñoz, 56, founded Mujeres de la Tierra, an organization that works to empower women who've traditionally been excluded from the environmental conversation. In anticipation of Earth Day, she spoke with NEWSWEEK's Jessica Bennett:

NEWSWEEK: Describe the biggest environmental issues facing the Latino community in Los Angeles.

Muñoz: That's a tough question, but I would say it's a lack of access to passive and active recreational opportunities, to green space to play, to parks. Latinos in many urban areas are the new mainstream, but unfortunately that does not translate in the equitable distribution of resources—especially in the "green world." A lot of power plants and factories are traditionally put in minority neighborhoods, and we suffer as a result of that. What we want are all the things that are necessary to good community health in any urban area: trees and clean air quality.

I know the creation of this organization has very personal roots. But why focus on Latinas specifically?

Five years ago, the National Resources Defense Council released a report on Latino health—about how Latino children were suffering disproportionately as a result of environmental woes in their neighborhoods. The report was written in both English and in Spanish, and I remember being so happy it had been written in Spanish so that many in the community could read it. But a few days later, there was an article about the report in a local paper, and not one Latino was interviewed for it. I was really bothered by that, but it was a pattern I had begun to see: the Latino community not being involved in the environmental conversation.

Why do you think that is?

At the end of the day, it's all about power, influence and money, which we don't see that much of

in our communities. Environmentalism is big business. And though there are good people working in our communities, often they're one-, two- or three-person [efforts], and it's harder to get the funding or recognition.

What does environmentalism mean to you?

I think when you talk about the environment, most people are talking about the natural elements: air, water, the earth. But for me, and for many in my community, the environment starts with the family. Many of us come from farming backgrounds, and our relationship with the land is almost a spiritual experience. If you look at the history of Mexican-Americans, our whole lives are related to Mother Earth and the natural elements.

Is it possible that the history of Latinos in this country has actually fostered more sustainable practices?

When you don't have the luxury of having a lot of stuff, you're resourceful because you have to be. Many of the women I work with live in apartments without access to yards or land, and when I ask them what would make their lives better, they say, "A place where we can grow our own vegetables." For many of us, land is very precious; we come from backgrounds where we grow our own corn and vegetables and fruit. And this is certainly sustainable, but many people don't continue it, because the land around us is very contaminated.

Do you think that through organizations like yours, we can move beyond the idea that environmentalism is a luxury of the elite?

Absolutely. I think for many years, we had these alarming articles about if we don't take ownership, that global warming will result in all these horrible things. Well, now that's happening, and people are seeing it with their own eyes. I think we're beginning to realize that this is not someone else's problem; it's ours. And as a result of that, whether we call it the environment or not, we're doing things to change it. So it's no longer going to be a white, middle-class, affluent movement, it's all of us doing it. It just seems that some of us don't have the media or the publicity machines to show what we're doing.

What can NEWSWEEK readers do to help?

On the very small scale, I think we can all look at what we do in our households. Do you take 20-minute showers? Do you turn off the water when you brush your teeth? All of those little things are big things, and it all starts at home. But I think people can also organize themselves and work toward a common goal: get involved in cleanup days, take ownership and pride in your neighborhood. If you want a community garden, look for empty land. Get to know your neighbors. I think all of these things are good for strengthening neighborhoods, and for raising the next generation of activists.