

Fighting For Healthy Air in Every Neighborhood

One of the biggest causes of climate pollution is the use of fossil fuels, like coal, oil, and gas.

In Buffalo, N.Y., residents who live on the West Side are continually exposed to pollution due to the fact that they live near Peace Bridge, which is a primary route for large trucks and heavy traffic. Asthma rates are nearly four times the national average, and people living there suffer from other respiratory illnesses.

One such resident is Luz Velez. She sat down with her close friend Geo Hernandez to talk about the impacts of climate pollution on their health and quality of life.

Transcript:

Luz Velez: I started feeling sick around 1990. I was always getting lung and respiratory infections. They would give me antibiotics. Oh it's the flu or maybe you got bronchitis. Then I was hospitalized, and I started suffering from seizure disorders. They told me, "Your seizures were environmental." The same thing with the lung infections. If you live on the Lower West Side, and you live near the Peace Bridge, Peace Bridge connects Canada to Buffalo. So when the trucks have to idle, there's a lot of diesel fuel that's in the air. And those people who live there are affected.

Geo Hernandez: Having been through this ongoing experience of your health, who is most at risk from climate pollution?

Luz: We as people who don't have the advantage of having great jobs or any jobs, we tend to be the people who are most affected. People like to say marginalized. I like to say that we poor. 'Cause that's what we are.

Geo: From a really young age, I had prediabetes, high cholesterol, high blood pressure.

I used to always blame myself. Not recognizing that because I was poor, the air that I was breathing in in the South Bronx determined a lot of my health. And even now in Buffalo, I live minutes away from the Peace Bridge. I'm ingesting that pollution, as well as our kids. And so our bodies are processing that not only right now, but also for years to come.

How did you hear about PUSH Buffalo?

Luz: A canvasser happened to be knocking on people's doors, and I had kind of lost my voice. Maybe it was psychological, maybe it was the infection, but I just really could not speak. So I just took the person by the arm and showed them what I was up against.

There was mold all throughout the house. There was a hole in my roof. There was no insulation. The woman was like, we have programs that can help you, and we're going to do what we can to fix this.

I feel like it was a godsend, because when you don't know, and you're depressed and isolated, you tend to want to blame yourself.

I'm glad that my house was fixable. But knowing full well that other people have the same issue, I decided to turn the pain out. That gave me the empowerment that I can do more.

I've played a role in helping to pass the Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act, which was one of the most aggressive climate action bills. And our big fight now is to tax the polluters.

We need to advocate. We need to fight. We need to go to our legislators. No one should have to live this way.

Geo: I remember your voice being so strong and wanting to learn so much about you. It felt refreshing to know that I wasn't alone.

Luz: Even if I'm, like, 40 years older than you, there were a lot of things that aligned where you come from, what you've been through, and what I've been through. And I'm there for you.

Geo: Neither of us were supposed to, medically speaking, be alive. But yet we've overcome so many struggles, and we can transform that, making sure that the next generation doesn't have to go through exactly what we went through.