



Raising Our Voice for Change

**Carmen Perez
Oxnard, California**

Today she's one of the faces, and the founders, of the largest protest movement in U.S. history – the 2017 Women's March on Washington – but getting there wasn't easy for Carmen Perez.

Carmen grew up in the small farming community of Oxnard, California – a town that was plagued by inequity and injustice. People in her Latinx community are twice as likely to live below the poverty line as those in white communities. As a result, they are more likely to suffer from health problems, and also less likely to graduate from high school and go on to escape poverty: a vicious cycle.

The deep-seated poverty in Oxnard created challenges for Carmen. She was introduced to violence at an early age. There was domestic violence in her family; gang violence in her community; police violence in the streets that often targeted her family members, specifically her older brothers, because of the way they looked. Drug and alcohol abuse negatively impacted families, and racism often showed up in their contact with police, and in high school.

Then, right before her 17th birthday, Carmen's older sister was killed in a one vehicular car accident. Her sister and Carmen were one day and two years apart, and she was killed right before her 19th birthday, and buried on Carmen's 17th birthday.

Carmen's relationship with her sister had been challenging. While Carmen focused on sports and schoolwork, her sister got involved in hanging out with the wrong crowd, which led to tension at home. Often having to chaperone her sister, Carmen would stick to the sidelines, dribbling her basketball and not saying much. But they were close in age, shared a room and a very special bond that was unbreakable.

Her sister's death put everything into perspective for Carmen. "She went out with her friends one night and never came back home," she says. "That became the catalyst that changed my life, and is what made me want to change the world. Losing her made me realize that life was too short and you couldn't wait for tomorrow to do what you could today. So I made a decision to live life to the fullest from that moment on."

As Carmen and her siblings suffered in the wake of her sister's death, their parents had to support them unconditionally, to love them and help them through their pain. And her parents stayed strong. They found it in themselves to perform an act of astonishing forgiveness: they decided not to press charges against the person who had taken their daughter's life. "At the time, I didn't understand my parents' decision, but looking back, that was my first exposure to restorative justice," she says.

Carmen embarked on her journey by enrolling at the local community college and playing basketball, and she went on from there to the University of California, Santa Cruz. There, she suddenly found herself exposed to a different sort of crowd – one where both privilege and resistance came together in different ways. She enrolled in a class on Chicana feminism, and studied with some of the great activists and scholars of the protest and feminist movements: Aida Hurtado, Angela Davis, Craig Haney, and others.

Unlike many of her peers, Carmen had to pay her own way through college by working multiple jobs. But this opened up unexpected opportunities. She began to work at the Youth Community Restoration Project, where she helped mentor young people coming out of the justice system by getting them jobs and creating leadership opportunities for them. She also cofounded Girlzpace, which provided gender-responsive services for girls in the community. Ultimately she went on to work at the Santa Cruz County Probation Department to serve girls within the system, and do system accountability. Like Carmen,

some of the girls had a vision of a different sort of future for themselves — one not defined by violence, but by resistance to it.

Through this work Carmen came into contact with the organization Barrios Unidos, and its founder, Nane Alejandrez. Nane had founded the organization in 1977, and he had a radical idea: instead of isolating and locking up young people who had committed crimes, he said, we should listen to them and support them with the tools to succeed.

Returning from Vietnam, where he had seen the injustice and cruelty of war firsthand, he saw injustice echoed at home through mass incarceration. Thirty-five members of his family had been behind bars — an entire generation locked up and forgotten.

Nane saw a spark in Carmen; he brought her on board, and became something of a father figure and mentor for her. He was a humble and fair person, and expected a lot from her, but he also supported her and knew she was destined for greatness. “I was able to really learn from him,” she says. “He didn't have to tell me what his ideology was or what his theory of change was; you could see it in his mannerisms, in the way in which he lived, and led.”

For example, when Nane would be invited to be a keynote speaker somewhere, he wouldn't be on stage waiting for the guests to come in, but in the aisles welcoming them, as an usher would. Nane embodied servant leadership, and Carmen saw how people responded to this kind of warmth, which led her to bring it to her own work later on.

During the 1990s the need for organizing around criminal justice issues was increasing in the United States. The War on Drugs saw the prison population skyrocket across the country, and communities like Carmen's were the most affected. She made it her mission to right these wrongs, and fight against the injustice she saw.

One day Nane introduced Carmen to one of his mentors, Harry Belafonte, who was partnering with him on prison reform for black and brown youth. The beloved Jamaican singer and actor, a friend of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., was a legend in the Civil Rights movement. He had raised millions of dollars by engaging other celebrities to perform at his fundraisers. His generosity was so pure, and so unwavering, that Coretta Scott King, an activist in her own right, said, “Whenever we got into trouble, or when tragedy struck, Harry has always come to our aid, his generous heart wide open.”

When Harry and Carmen met, they immediately hit it off. Soon after, Harry asked Carmen to join his organization, The Gathering for Justice, as a founding member, and move to New York City. The Gathering for Justice grounded communities in the ideology of Dr. King—Kingian Nonviolence—and was embarking on building a national movement to end child incarceration.

The introduction to Mr. Belafonte brought Carmen's activism to a whole new level, and gave her the opportunity to fight for real, structural change in communities across the country that had long suffered from inequity, discrimination, and the legacies of racism and slavery. But she never lost sight of the lessons she had learned from Nane. “The movement is not about one individual, it's about building collective power,” she says. “There are times when even though *you've* not done something, it is your responsibility as a moral leader to repair the harm that's been done.”

Carmen's star as an activist was on the rise after she founded Justice League NYC, a manifestation of The Gathering for Justice, when in 2014 another tragedy struck, and moved her activism into another arena. That summer, she went to Ferguson, Missouri, where a week earlier, an unarmed black man, Michael Brown Jr., had been shot by police, sparking protests that would eventually spread across the city, and the nation. When she landed in Ferguson, the August heat was oppressive, ominous. That day, her phone rang: it was a call from back home. Her nephew, just 22 years old, had cancer. “That became the second catalyst for me,” she says. “It gave me this sense of urgency, and again the feeling that life was too short.”

In Oxnard, which is one of the country's top strawberry-picking regions, pesticides sprayed by large-scale fruit farms waft across the countryside and into the respiratory systems of the people who live, work, and go to school there. Although it is not known how her nephew got cancer, the school that he attended is right across the road from one of these farms. Breathing those toxic fumes was not healthy for anyone who lived nearby.

Latinx farmworkers in California have long fought for the state to recognize the harm inflicted upon them by agricultural practices. They took their case to court, suing the California Department of Pesticide Regulation for discrimination, because the chemicals that are sprayed disproportionately affect Latinx communities. After a decade-long battle, they won; and the

Environmental Protection Agency was forced to restrict its chemical use.

Carmen's nephew's illness, and his daily fight to live forced Carmen to realize that invisible, insidious attacks on the environment can play just as big a role in perpetuating inequity as overt violence and discrimination. "When I got the news about my nephew, I realized that this movement was not just about criminal justice reform, or police brutality," she says. "It's about environmental justice. It's about immigration reform. It's about all these other things that impact us all."

"One of the teachings from Barrios Unidos that we talk about is honoring Mother Earth, and also honoring our spirit," she says. "It's all interconnected. It's all valuable. It's all important. And it needs to also all be recognized." When people see Carmen's image today on posters and banners; or when they hear her on stage at the Women's March in front of a roaring crowd of 2 million people in Washington, DC, and 5 million people around the world, they may not know the story of the little girl who was passionate about basketball and hip hop, and who sought to escape her small farming community after her sister's death. But her message to potential activists from across the country is simple: that little girl could be you.

She sees a new generation of activists coming of age and bringing their own passion to causes across the board. "Whether it's climate justice, immigration reform, criminal justice reform, violence prevention, Black Lives Matter, whatever it may be, there's a lane for them," she says. "Young people should always remember that their voice is powerful, and they have always been at the forefront of every movement in America. Our youth are powerful, sacred, and are the leaders we've been waiting for. We are ready to mentor them and for them to lead us, and build together with. If I can share anything with them is that they should never ever take for granted the opportunity that is presented to them. Don't be afraid to take a leap!"

These days, Carmen has a small child of her own: a vocal baby boy who is already clamoring for change — though at this stage, it's more likely for a change of diapers than for political change. The world she wants for her son, and for his generation, she says, doesn't start in the future, however. It starts now.

"I often remind young people that although we believe that they are our future, they are actually our present, and are the greatest gift that we have," she says. Still, she recognizes that it can be hard to take the leap into the life of an activist. "And if they're not ready, it's okay, because those of us that are out here are going to be ready to receive them whenever they are."

Thinking back to her younger years, she is grateful to Nane Alejandrez, who first saw her spark; and to Harry Belafonte, for giving her a platform to raise her voice; and to everyone else who has taken Carmen under their wing. "It is not only our responsibility to create pathways of leadership for our youth," she says. "But also to cultivate them."

You can cage the singer but not the song.

Harry Belafonte

Call To Action: The Gathering for Justice League NYC | Justice League CA:

<https://www.gatheringforjustice.org/justiceleaguenyc>

Barrios Unidos: <http://www.barriosunidos.net/>

Stone Soup Leadership Institute
www.stonesoupleadership.org
www.soup4youngworld.com