

Transcript: Everyday Climate Champions Podcast

Episode 10

Climate, Food, & Justice: Farm-to-School Cafeteria Project in Watsonville, CA

Hasini Parapelli (co-host): Hi, listeners. Thank you for joining us, Hasini Parapelli and Isabella Genereaux, your hosts for this episode of Everyday Climate Champions. Today we're focusing on an innovative farm-to-high school cafeteria program in Watsonville, California.

Isabella Genereaux (co-host): Hasini and I are both freshmen in high school. We became interested in how to address climate change and wanted to discover new ways young people like us are getting involved. We found out about the Farm-2-Cafeteria program, a partnership between Pajaro Valley High School and Esperanza Community Farms in Watsonville, and we wanted to know more.

Today we're talking to Alma Leonor-Sanchez, Jesus Basulto, and Karla Leyva, who are all part of the Farm to Cafeteria program.

Hasini Parapelli (co-host): Alma is the project manager of the program and Jesus and Karla were in the program as high school seniors. We'll learn about how they work on both climate justice and food justice issues. You'll also find out how you can get started in your own community.

Isabella Genereaux (co-host) Watsonville is the traditional territory of the Amah Mutsun tribe.

Hasini Parapelli (co-host): Thanks for being guests on the Everyday Climate Champions Podcast, Alma, Jesus and Karla.

Isabella Genereaux (Co-host): We're so glad to have you here.

Alma Leonor-Sanchez (guest): Thank you so much for having us.

Jesus Basulto (guest): Thank you. I'm excited to be here.

Karla Leyva (guest): Hello, thank you for having me.

Karla Leyva (guest): Alma, what are the three programs of Esperanza Community Farms, and how do they work?

Alma Leonor-Sanchez (guest): The three main moving components of Esperanza Community Farms are the Farm to Cafeteria Project, our CSA, which is Community Supported Agriculture, and a co-op that we support.

The Farm to Cafeteria Project, which is the one that we are most familiar with (me, Karla, and Jesus) is a student-led internship that works with students in the Pajaro Valley to bring fresh produce to their schools so that they can prep the salads and learn about the food system and where our food is coming from. And also find ways in which their schools can get this program institutionalized, so healthy food is just something that is a regular in schools.

So finding ways to develop curriculum that teachers can work off of so that we can get more students on the farm and start more conversations around food justice and climate justice. And finding ways for students to see themselves in leadership positions around these issues.

And then, the CSA program at Esperanza is Community Supported Agriculture. And we have about 130 members where we harvest twice a week and we deliver produce to their homes.

So the co-op is called Nine Organic Farmers Co-op. And these are farmers in the Pajaro Valley, in Salinas, in Watsonville, and these farmers are providing the produce that we give at schools for the salads.

Isabella Generaux (Co-host): Is Esperanza unique in Watsonville? Are there others around you interested in your work?

Alma Leonor-Sanchez (guest): My experience with Esperanza was definitely my first time being on a community farm. When you drive through Watsonville, you typically see a lot of monoculture farms, which is just rows of one type of vegetable or fruit. Being on a polyculture farm, we typically grow about 25 fruits and vegetables for our CSA and for Farm to cafeteria.

And that's for different reasons. One is so that we can provide a variety of produce to our members, but also because inter-cropping essentially benefits the soil. When you're growing one type of produce in a plot of land, it essentially strips the soil of nutrients.

And I think Esperanza is also unique in Watsonville because we're very justice-oriented. And so a lot of our programs and our projects are implemented with a justice and equity lens. We want people in Watsonville to see themselves in these spaces and be able to take leadership roles when it comes to their health.

So being in contact with people and showing them ways in which they can participate, even if they're not here every day. So yeah, I think there's definitely a growing interest in what we're doing, and people are just finding ways to see themselves in our projects.

Hasini Parapelli (co-host): Can you tell us more about your experiences with the Farm to Cafeteria program?

Karla Leyva (guest): The idea is that our school is right next to a farm. So we should be getting our produce from there. Because the produce is organic, it's being harvested by community members and we should be able to know where our food is coming from and we should be eating well.

Farm to Cafeteria helps battle the challenge of finding affordable, healthy produce. It's very hard for a lot of families in our community, even though we're surrounded by food.

Jesus Basulto (guest): Farm to Cafeteria also targets climate change in the sense of having locally organic produce be transported to schools that are in the community, rather than receiving produce coming from out of state that get delivered by trucks, which then creates more gas emissions.

Hasini Parapelli (co-host): Yeah. Trucks are burning gas to bring produce, which makes no sense when you're growing it right there.

Do you see any other intersections between food justice and the climate?

Jesus Basulto (guest): I would say climate change, because climate change affects communities of agriculture. An example of that would be the floods that affected us this past winter. They affected a community that was filled with farmers and it affected us because there's no produce available for us right now. There's farmers without jobs.

Alma Leonor-Sanchez (guest): Yeah, there's a lot of intersections. So food justice looks like being able to localize our food system and make sure that people who are working the lands here also have access to food.

And I think this intersects with climate justice because Watsonville is also known for the wetlands ecosystems and the extremely diverse biodiversity here. A lot of farms are just across the street from a wetland. Our farm is a wetland area where a lot of students gather. And so when ag lands are being pumped with pesticides and fertilizers, what does that mean for the wetlands and the biodiversity?

Isabella Generaux (Co-host): Karla, what is your experience doing presentations? Like, what kind of audience reception are you getting?

Karla Leyva (guest): Mainly they've been very receptive to the idea of our project, and they've been really encouraging about our work. My favorite presentations are always with parents. They're supportive and willing to learn and involve themselves in all the hard conversations about food justice, about cultural norms that we've accepted, involving the environment and things like that. And they've always just been really understanding about what we're trying to achieve and why we're doing it.

Alma Leonor-Sanchez (guest): When we talk about who's involved in our farm, I like to think about the bigger picture of food systems and who's involved in our food chain. And so one of our goals in Farm to Cafeteria is to localize our food chain: being able to produce fruits and vegetables locally that are given to people who live in the same area. The farm is also working with community partners on how we can bring more advocacy to climate justice issues.

Our farm is a regenerative farm. We practice a lot of sustainable and climate-conscious practices. And so being able to show the community that and show how agriculture can be climate-conscious and sustainable is really important to us.

Hasini Parapelli (co-host): What is regenerative agriculture and how is it different from organic farming?

Alma Leonor-Sanchez (guest): I think regenerative agriculture, in a simple sense, is farming while being conscious of the earth and the people. So being mindful of what we're putting into the soil and how we're treating the people that are working the land. And how the biodiversity around the farm is also being impacted.

Obviously, inter-cropping is one of our practices to make sure the soil is healthy. Cover cropping. We do drip irrigation. And I think that's different from organic agriculture because even organic agriculture can be mass-produced and I think

anything that gets mass-produced can become wasteful and harmful to the earth - if you're not careful about it.

Hasini Parapelli (co-host): How about your work alongside the farmworkers?

Karla Leyva (guest): I think that people need to realize that farmworkers, especially farm workers in California are connected to a lot of different resources. They have a lot of untapped knowledge. Many of them have come from Mexico and started their lives around agriculture and around the environment. They're really knowledgeable about the way farming is done in both regions.

Farmworkers are super integrated in their community and they're able to navigate that relationship between agriculture and people's health and how they're effected. So I think we need to start taking them more seriously - if we let them speak and if we let them lead more initiatives that not only do they know what they're doing, but I think they can start working more creatively.

Jesus Basulto (guest): Adding to what Karla just said, farmers also show you that farming is not easy work. It allows you to appreciate the environment and appreciate the land where produce is coming from. I think it's important that students are able to connect and see the perspective that a farmer has towards life.

Alma Leonor-Sanchez (guest): There's a lot to learn from our elders when it comes to stewarding the land -like land-based healing practices that can come from growing your own food and spending time on a farm or just like being outside.

There's so much that I didn't realize about farming and about slowing down and being in tune with the time of the earth. You have to like be patient. Earth is on its own time. And so that's something that I learned from older generations on the farm.

Isabella Generaux (Co-host): Thank you.

Isabella Generaux (Co-host): Is there anything else you would like to share with folks who may not be familiar with your work?

Karla Leyva (guest): Yeah. I think that one of the cool things about our work is that it can be implemented at differing levels - anywhere. Whether it's just, you

know, taking students out to local organic farms or having them talk to farmers - that's a small way that you can help move towards change.

Or even just educating them about where their food comes from and how that's affecting the planet. I think that a lot of people think that climate change and food justice, they're problems that are out of our league. But change can be made anywhere and you just have to start.

Isabella Generaux (Co-host): Thank you for coming here and speaking with us today. I've learned so much. I'm so grateful for that.

Karla Leyva (guest): Thank you for having us and listening to what we have to say.

Jesus Basulto (guest): Definitely. Thank you for having us.

Isabella Generaux (Co-host): Hey, listeners! Alma, Jesus and Karla shared some great resources on their work and how you can get involved, maybe even at your local school. Please check out the show notes below to follow the links.

Hasini Parapelli (co-host): If you would like to give us feedback, please answer the brief listener survey you'll also find there.

Isabella Genereaux (co-host): For this episode of Everyday Climate Champions, the sound designer was Kayla Anchell and the executive producer and editor was Dalya Massachi. We're your hosts, Hasini Parapelli and Isabella Genereaux. Our full production team is listed below in the show notes. Music in this episode is by Blue Dot Sessions.