

PERTENECIENDO

NUESTRAS RAÍCES, NUESTRA TIERRA



**A NATURALLY LATINOS CONFERENCE/
US FOREST SERVICE PHOTOGRAPHY EBOOK**



PERTENECIENDO

NUESTRAS RAÍCES, NUESTRA TIERRA

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by Denisse Guitarra, Conservation Project Specialist and 2024 Naturally Latinos Conference Co-Chair

From the endless rivers, winds, fiery volcanos, and mountains, Latin America's landscape is as diverse and culturally rich as the people who inhabit it. Latine immigrants brought with them diverse traditions, foods, and stories to share in their new home in the United States. The book of photographs you are about to enjoy, *Perteneciendo: Nuestras Raíces, Nuestra Tierra* (Belonging: Our Roots, Our Earth) highlights how the Latine community in the DMV connects with our Madre Tierra through our work, hobbies, traditions, culture, and much more.

My personal journey to belonging to nature is connected to Earth's four main elements of fire, air, earth, and water. The fire element arises from witnessing the eruption of the Guagua Pichincha volcano when I was seven years old. The eruption sent up a white mushroom cloud of ash that contrasted with the deep blue Quito sky. The eruption was far enough away that my family and I were safe. However, it did ignite my curiosity and interest to learn more about nature and how it works.

The air element connects me to my mom, who tells stories of her childhood growing up between the towns of Zurmi, where the air was humid, and Loja, where the air was cool and crisp. The way she narrates her childhood in the Amazon region made me want to protect the little of it that remains. That inspired me to become a biologist.

The earth element is something I have been attracted to more recently. In the last few years, along with a friend who is an expert on the subject matter, I have visited caverns up and down the east coast. I have been awestruck at how caves form and how those formations take millions of years to be created.

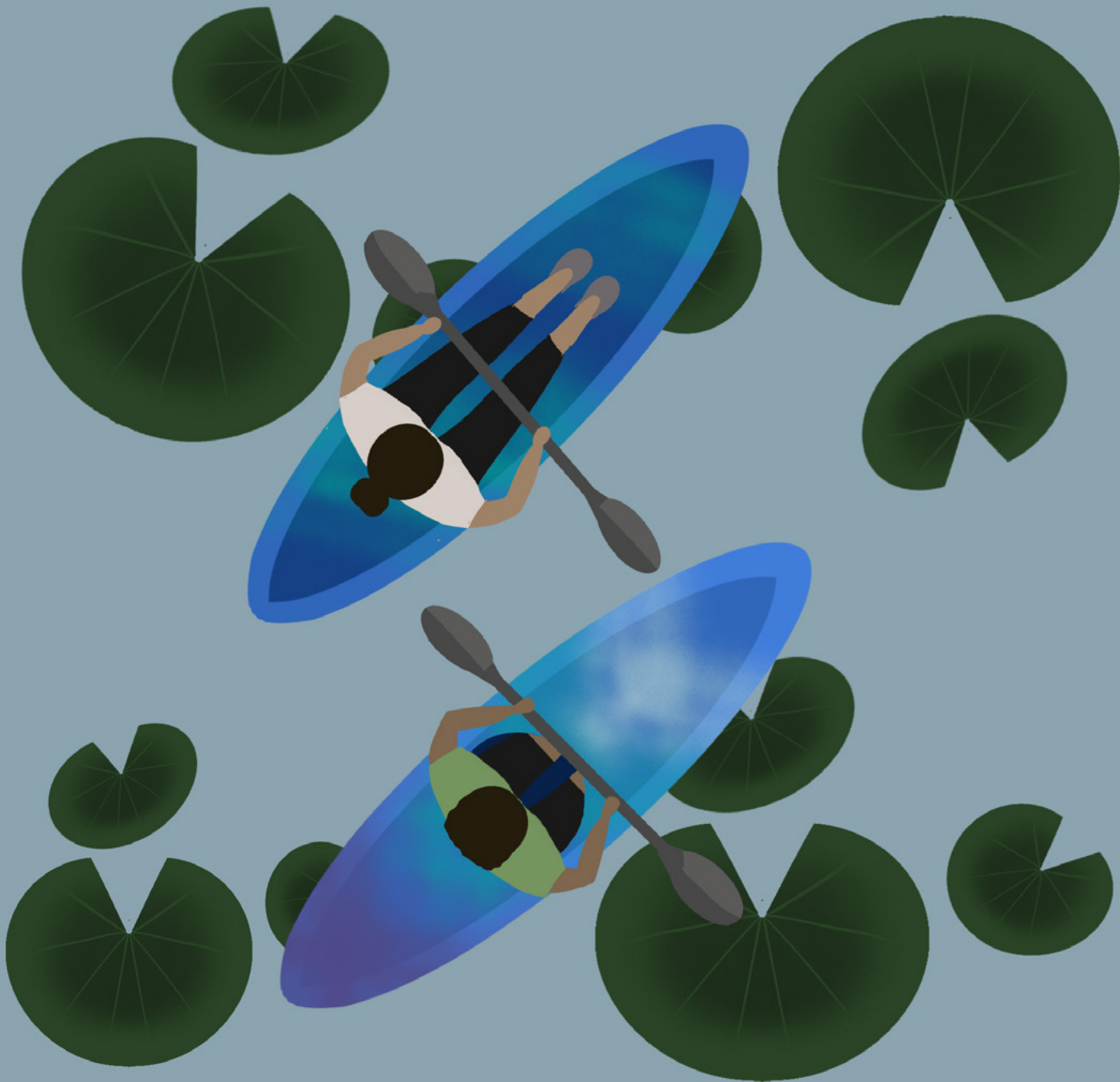
The water element is by far my favorite. I find comfort and healing in being near any body of water. During the pandemic, I found peace and refuge learning to kayak in my nearby Little Seneca Lake. All the four elements shape in one way or another how I feel and belong to nature. These elements have also helped me find ways to connect with others to nature.

When I became the Maryland Conservation Advocate at Nature Forward, I learned so much via our community engagement with immigrant Latine families. I saw and experienced the fact that we all have so many diverse and intricate ways to connect with nature. As the 2024 Naturally Latinos Conference Co-Chair, I was mesmerized by the many different, intricate, and intersectional ways Latine leaders, community members, and students are working every day to break down barriers in order that more Latin@s enjoy, learn about, and protect our region's environment.

Perteneciendo: Nuestras Raíces, Nuestra Tierra is a unique window into the lives of some of our local DMV Latine community members, a means to discover how each one of us pertenecemos en la naturaleza. Some people see nature as a place to relax, to do a parrillada (BBQ), to hang out with friends and family, to exercise, or to connect at a higher level and treat nature as a sacred ground. All are authentic and wonderful ways to belong and be part of nature. We all have so much to learn from one another about the many ways we can experience, appreciate, and protect the natural world.

This book, made with a generous sponsorship from the US Forest Service Office of Community and Urban Forestry, also serves as an illuminating tour of some of the most adored forested parks in the metro Washington, DC area – parks that are used in a multitude of ways by the people who live near them. These parks are a gift, and we must care for them.

We hope you enjoy *Perteneciendo: Nuestras Raíces, Nuestra Tierra*.





MAKING *PERTENECIENDO*: *NUESTRAS RAÍCES, NUESTRA TIERRA*

by Gabriela Paola Franco Peña Photographer, Graphic Designer, and Illustrator

I'm proud of the people featured in these pages, these extraordinary Latinx leaders photographed for *Perteneciendo: Nuestras Raíces, Nuestras Tierra*. I'm inspired by their work, enriched by their stories, and thankful for the opportunity to assemble these beautiful images of Latinx community builders and nature protectors enjoying the forested parks and nature spaces of the metro DC area.

Throughout this year-long artistic extension of Nature Forward's Naturally Latinos conference, Ben Israel and I met and photographed conservationists, educators, non-profit and co-op founders, community organizers, birders, leaders of nature centers, native plant gardeners, US Forest Service workers, and more. The people you are about to meet embody the richly diverse Latinx population in the United States. Their origins span 15 countries, from Argentina to Mexico. During this project, sponsored by the US Forest Service's Urban and Community Forest Program (UCF), we traveled widely across the metro area to multiple nature spaces across Washington, DC, Maryland, and Virginia. We visited parks, wetlands sanctuaries, nature centers, a conservation area, a wildlife preserve, a botanical garden, and much more. We even photographed at that most quintessential of DC destinations: the National Mall.

In the best photo sessions, rich conversations flow freely. Even as we chase perfect light, rapidly switch locations, and echo the photographer's familiar refrain—"Can you do that one more time?"—these seemingly rushed moments between photographer and subject often blossom into genuine connection and friendship.

We may have been out of breath, but we sure did talk. About our own journeys to America, or those of our parents and grandparents. About our lives. About the work we do. And about our connections to nature. These conversations punctuated by pops of flash were woven into a year of deep contemplation about the many themes underlying this book. What do we uniquely bring from our different cultures to our relationship with nature here in the US? What can we do together with this vibrant, melting-pot energy of ours? Or consider this question: with nature threatened as never before, can we, as Latinx environmentalists and nature advocates working at the heart of policy-making and political power, move the needle on environmental policy? And finally: in our work on a shared vision for our planet, can we motivate more people to enjoy, cherish, and defend nature?

Season after season, portrait by portrait, Ben and I endeavored to piece together a visual, working definition of *Perteneciendo: Nuestras Raíces, Nuestras Tierra*. Of course, in the particular lies the universal. In the making of this book, we hoped to present a larger truth: everyone in this country, regardless of origins, belongs – not only in nature, but in all ways.

This eBook is the second in a series. In 2022, Nature Forward released *Belonging: Black Americans in Nature*, the first book in the series, as a companion piece to the Taking Nature Black Conference. A core mission of both books is to highlight the forested areas of metro DC. Even for those of us who moved to the DC area because we feel comfortable with a fast pace (I learned to drive on the narrow, vendor-filled streets of San Salvador, where every centimeter of asphalt is hard-won – as

useful preparation for life in the DMV as my ten years studying English), living and working here can be demanding. But you can visit the places featured in the book for a well-deserved break.

Please support your urban and community parks! Many that we visited are struggling with biodiversity loss, water pollution, and the effects of increased heat and longer droughts. These are some of the same challenges nature faces throughout the world. You can support your parks by supporting the groups that champion and defend parks. As you enjoy the portraits of these hard-working advocates and read their stories, I hope you are inspired to get involved, if you aren't already. You can contribute your time and talent to some of the great work being done in conservation, nature education, environmental protection and conservation, forestry, community organizing, and more.

Nuestras Raíces, Nuestras Tierra. Remember your roots. For me, it's the flocks of parakeets flying and chirping above my house as I prepare for school, the volcano I see as soon as I step out the door, and the aroma of eucalyptus trees along the way. We can summon those memories of the earth there, that first connection, those first roots. Then, *¡Pa'lante!* We can serve the earth where we live now, loving both places.



PERTENECIENDO

NUESTRAS RAÍCES, NUESTRA TIERRA



RACHEL CARSON CONSERVATION PARK



REDGATE PARK

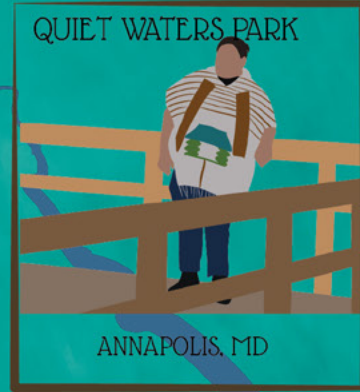
LONG BRANCH



NORTHWEST BRANCH



SOLDIERS DELIGHT



MEADOWLARK BOTANICAL GARDENS



ROCK CREEK PARK

WASHINGTON D.C.



DEISTELL PARK



LAKE ARTEMESIA



VIRGINIA



CEO CANAL

KENILWORTH AQUATIC GARDENS



MARYLAND



CONSTITUTION GARDENS

MARVIN GAYE PARK



GREEN SPRING GARDENS



JUG BAY NATURE AREA

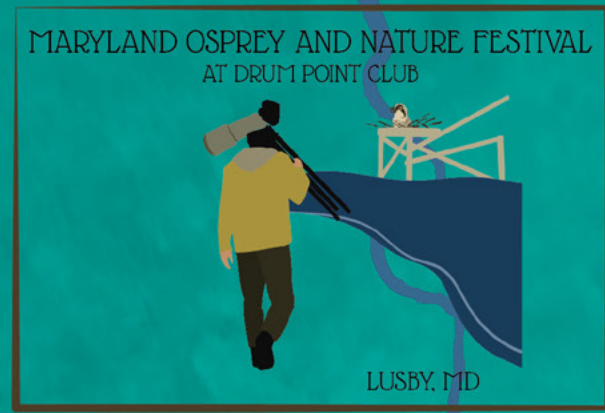


DYKE MARSH WILDLIFE PRESERVE

MAP OF PLACES IN THE BOOK



MASON NECK STATE PARK



LUSBY, MD

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GABRIELA PAOLA FRANCO PEÑA AND BENJAMIN A. ISRAEL



GABY ARGOTI-FERNANDEZ

Commercial Loan Portfolio Manager, DC Green Bank & Vice Chair, Hispanic Affairs for Maryland & Founder of FlanCake Foundation & Published Author
Constitution Gardens, the National Mall, Washington, DC

Before moving to the US at age nine, one of my most vivid childhood memories of Ecuador was spending summers at my grandmother's farm. Getting lost among the fruit trees was a magical experience that deepened my appreciation for nature and my culture. Any time of year, nature was never far. At our home in Baños de Agua Santa, Ecuador, breathtaking landscapes, lush greenery, and the calming presence of water surrounded us.

My heritage shapes who I am and drives my passion for sustainability and community. Nature is a bridge to my roots, reminding me of the beauty and serenity of my hometown. It's a space where I can reflect on my identity and heritage. For many in the Latinx community, these experiences create a powerful connection to our culture, reinforcing our sense of belonging in both familiar and new landscapes.

As a parent, I want my family to share that same connection to nature. It's essential for me to instill in my children a love for the outdoors and the understanding that we must cherish and preserve our environment. I want my children to have the same opportunities to explore, appreciate, and respect nature as I did.

Running outside brings me a sense of peace and grounding that's hard to replicate anywhere else. As I move, I see vibrant colors all around and I hear the gentle rustle of leaves and the cheerful chirping of birds. The breeze, and the warmth of the sun, provide a beautiful contrast that makes me feel alive.



(Left to right): sons Nicholas Fernandez and James Fernandez, husband Luis Fernandez, daughter Amelia Fernandez, and Gaby Argoti-Fernandez.





REVEREND LEONINA ARISMENDI 🇺🇷

Writer & Artist & Activist

Kenilworth Park and Aquatic Gardens, Washington, DC

My formative years were spent in my grandmother's garden in Montevideo, Uruguay. She taught me about medicinal plants, composting, growing food, and cooking. After moving to Virginia, I'd often cut class in high school and take naps in a nearby canal where turtles would just hang. I coped with anxiety, depression, and chronic illness by being outside.

My mom often tells the story of five-year-old me making posters and rallying my cousins and sister to protest against pollution. In my twenties, I was arrested for protesting on the University of Mary Washington campus in support of student demands for divestment from fossil fuels. Co-existing with and championing our environment is a legacy passed down from my matriarchs.

Kenilworth Aquatic Park is special to me. I spent time there with Defensores de la Cuenca tagging mussels before they were released to the Anacostia River to help clean our watershed. Growing up undocumented, pre-DACA, put my childhood dream of becoming a scientist out of reach, however, Defensores offered outdoor joy, reconnection to past ambitions, and opportunities to advocate for nature and people.

We do not own the land. Nature does not belong to people or countries or nations. I believe we belong to Nature, to our ecosystem, and to everything that exists in it. As Latinx People, many of us immigrants far away from our Motherlands, it is easy to forget that all of *this* is Abya Yala but the truth is that we Belong here because we Belong to Her.



Leonina Arismendi with sons (left to right) Lalo A. and Logan.



American bittern.





CINTIA CABIB

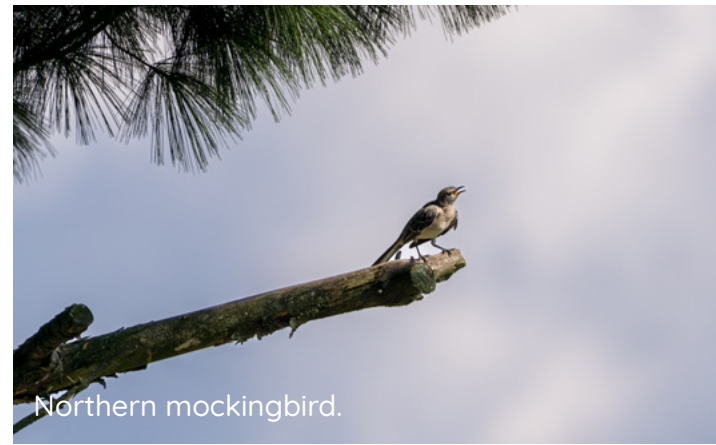
Documentary Filmmaker
RedGate Park, Rockville, MD

My family emigrated from Argentina to the US when I was six. I have fond memories of looking for frogs in a stream near our house and being fascinated by caterpillars and other insects. These days, some of my favorite places to enjoy nature are Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, DC and Brookside Gardens and RedGate Park in Montgomery County, Maryland.

During my filmmaking career, I have produced 22 short and long-form documentaries. Since I speak fluent Spanish, I have often been drawn to stories which focus on the Washington, DC area's Latino community. Environmental issues have also been a focus of my work.

My most recent documentary is "Bird Walk." The film features the birds and birders who have flocked to Rockville's RedGate Park, where more than 160 bird species have been sighted, and follows the grassroots campaign which helped preserve this defunct golf course as a public park.

During the production of the documentary, I traveled to the park over 100 times to film birds. In the process, I became a birder. I loved seeing the Red-winged Blackbirds with their red and yellow shoulder patches, observing the elegant gait of the Great Blue Heron, and watching Belted Kingfishers diving for fish in the ponds. I came to appreciate how important green spaces like RedGate Park are for both year-round resident birds and migratory birds. I hope "Bird Walk" will inspire people to discover the joys of birding and motivate them to protect our declining bird populations.



Northern mockingbird.



Northern mockingbird.





HELEN CORTÉS 🇺🇸

National Program Manager for Urban Forest Health and Partnership, USDA Forest Service
Meadowlark Botanical Gardens, Vienna, VA

As a Puerto Rican, my journey to protect the nature began in my grandmother's backyard in Hatillo, Puerto Rico, where she gathered all kind of fruits and veggies, papayas, guayabas, avocados, limes... always saying, "La naturaleza siempre provee" – Nature always provides. Even when money was tight, she showed me that nature was always there to sustain us. Her wisdom instilled in me a deep love and gratitude for the earth, teaching me to appreciate and care for it. I know she would be proud to see me working for an Agency with the mission of conservation.

Growing up in Puerto Rico was a blessing. Every family celebration or gathering took place outdoors. Yet, this connection to nature was not without its trials. We experienced firsthand the devastation of hurricanes and other events that would uproot our favorite trees. In those moments of loss, we felt a deep sorrow for the beauty that was taken from us, but also respect for nature's capacity to recover, which mirrored our own struggles and triumphs as a community. I have come to understand that nature is resilient, just like us. It endures, adapts, and thrives, reminding us of the importance of nurturing and protecting it, just as we care for one another. This sense of belonging in nature is profound; it is a reminder that we are part of something larger than ourselves. It teaches us that our roots run deep, both in the earth and in our shared experiences.





Josefina Doumbia with husband Lassine Doumbia in their backyard native plant garden.

JOSEFINA (JO) DOUMBIA 🇷🇺

Retired Environmental Sustainability Expert & Biodiversity Crusader
& Native Garden Creator

At her home garden & at Green Spring Gardens, Alexandria, VA

I worked on caring for the environment throughout my professional career but somewhere along the way – a Midlife Environmental Crisis? – I developed a strong urge to make a hands-on direct and personal contribution towards environmental sustainability. I began planting a few native plants in my backyard and also installed bird feeders. Just with that my journey began.

As the saying goes: “plant them and they will come.” Pollinators and birds began to show up. My next logical step was to install a monarch butterfly patch to bring them host and nectar plants. Soon I had caterpillars and shortly after, monarchs. This nature refuge started taking shape. There are no more bird feeders. This little native sanctuary now has nectar-producing plants for the hummingbirds and seed-producing shrubs so other birds can eat throughout the seasons.

A discovery beyond the gifts of nature was the realization that planting, maintaining, and enjoying the garden calmed and soothed my senses.

The airspace is really busy today. The birds, the butterflies, the pollinators all fly constantly. In a few months, it will be winter, when nature appears dormant but is inwardly busy working, giving me inspiration to also go inward and reverence the magic of nature.

I enjoy nature, react to it, and look to protect it as a human being. This is for all humans. However, when Latinos are denied rights such as education, health, and work, they are deprived of another human right, the right to enjoy, benefit, and guard nature.







CESAR GARZON

Worker-Owner and Nursery Manager, Swamp Rose Cooperative

Rachel Carson Conservation Park, Olney, MD

Growing up in Venezuela, the outdoors was my playground. As a child, I scaled trees hunting for the sweetest fruits hidden behind leaves - a delicious snack under the shade on a sweltering day. Even a few tumbles from branches couldn't deter my enthusiasm for the natural world. Nature is so giving. I reciprocate by protecting it.

Although I've always cared about nature, the COVID pandemic sparked greater urgency and commitment. Nature became my lifeline, grounding me and revealing a deeper purpose. That's when I decided I wanted to take a more active role in safeguarding our environment.

Today, after two decades in the United States, I advance conservation and help make biodiversity thrive alongside like-minded environmentalists. As the worker-owners of Swamp Rose Co-op, we collectively champion nature while uplifting a workplace built on shared decision-making and shared benefit. Now in our third year, I am gratified to see the growing interest in our cooperative philosophy in the DC metro area.

Rachel Carson Conservation Park is a cherished local outdoor space for me. I marvel at the vibrant meadow dotted with foxglove beardtongue and native grasses. Cool, wooded paths come alive with birdsong and fern-dappled undergrowth. So calming. So relaxing. So nurturing.

Nature is a balm for the soul. My work in conservation, rooted in community and shared purpose, strongly resonates with my Latinx heritage. I have a deep appreciation for the people and places I am part of. In nature, and in my work, I've found where I truly belong.



Swamp Rose Cooperative worker-owners install a walkway and native plant garden.





GINA GHERTNER | ■ ■

GreenKids Lead Environmental Educator, Nature Forward

Mason Neck State Park, Lorton, VA

Much of my youth was spent in a big city: Lima, the capital of Peru. But every year, my family spent summer vacations in the Andes mountains. From the wonderful smells of wildflowers to the chilly nights at high elevations, experiencing first-hand the diversity in how people lived gave me a great appreciation for different cultures and how they perceive nature. I was fortunate to have more travel experiences during college as part of my forestry training. That allowed me to see the many amazing ecosystems we have in Peru. That's when I fell in love with ecology.

As GreenKids Lead Environmental Educator, I work with students from kindergarten through grade 12, as well as with adults. When you study nature, you realize that everything is interconnected. Nothing exists alone. Every element in nature belongs and is there for a reason.

Nature is sometimes peaceful, yes, but nature is also wild and unexpected. I enjoy awakening my senses to different smells: the smell of the rain; the smell of the seasons; the scent left by a fox. All paint a mental picture of other beings we share life with. Nature is so puzzling, and I love puzzles.

For those of us who come to the US from another country, nature is something that can help us feel at home, feel welcome, and feel that we belong. No matter where we are in the world, nature is there for all of us to enjoy, respect, and care for.





DENISSE ESTEFANÍA GUITARRA YANGUA 🇪🇨

Conservation Project Specialist, Nature Forward

Mason Neck State Park, Lorton, VA

As a child in Quito, Ecuador, I was always curious about nature. Witnessing the Guagua Pichincha volcano erupt at age seven ignited my interest in science. Listening to my mother's stories about growing up in the Amazon planted a seed in me to protect our planet. My middle school fascination with outer space inspired dreams of being an astronaut, but high school lessons about climate change turned me in the direction of environmental conservation.

Belonging means being part of nature and recognizing that we are nature. My mom and dad's families own farms. My grandparents used medicinal plants for curing ailments, making nature part of my culture. Many Latine people share a deep connection to the natural world through culture and customs, but maintaining these traditions is challenging.

My biggest accomplishment as Nature Forward's Maryland Conservation Advocate was passing and updating Montgomery County's Forest Conservation Law in 2023 after years of advocacy. I'm also proud of co-chairing the 2024 Naturally Latinos Conference and being able to help Latine leaders connect, share, and learn from one another.

For this book, my colleague Gina Ghertner and I enjoyed our first visit to Virginia's Mason Neck State Park. Belmont Bay offered breathtaking views as we explored it by kayak. When I'm outside, I feel inspired. If something is worrying me, being outdoors helps put everything in perspective. And as a birder, I delight in identifying birds by sight and sound, or just losing myself in their beautiful plumage, songs, and calls.



Ospreys.







Edwin Guevara, with his Maryland DNR colleague, Ben Giraldo.

EDWIN GUEVARA

Outreach and Education Specialist, Maryland Department of Natural Resources
Soldiers Delight Natural Environment Area, Owings Mills, MD

I grew up in the rural town of Manatí, Puerto Rico. I spent a lot of my childhood exploring the hillsides. I loved finding plants, insects, and reptiles. My favorite of all were the coquí frogs. The species I liked the best was the common coquí because it was so abundant that I could easily find them and look at them up close. Puerto Rico has these huge fern trees, and here was this tiny and resilient coquí! Nature comes in so many shapes and sizes, and all specialize in different things and have different methods of survival. Amazing!

I started out as a high school science teacher and now work as a youth nature educator for Maryland DNR, doing outreach throughout the state. I love this job. However, there are still big hurdles for Hispanic/Latinx people in getting jobs in the environmental field, especially in states where we are in the minority. There is more progress to be made.

Nature is for everybody. If we can help Latine people have more experiences in nature and give them opportunities to work in nature-related fields, we can foster growth within the community on conservation issues. That's a win-win.

In early summer, I held a "bat walk" for colleagues, friends, and family. First, we walked to a meadow, where I gave a talk on bat biology. Then we tried out a phone app that is able to detect the echolocation calls of bats. Bats use echolocation to hunt, at frequencies beyond the range of human hearing. Like I said, amazing!





The "bat walk" began with a talk on bat biology.



JOSE SALVADOR ICAZA V

Founder of Maryland Osprey and Nature Festival &
Environmentalist & Wildlife Photographer

*2024 Maryland Osprey and Nature Festival held at
the Drum Point Club, Lusby, MD*

I lived in Nicaragua until I was 10, in a coastal town on the Pacific, just steps from the beach. We didn't have many amenities, so we spent all our time outside. I remember the birds. Gulls, pelicans, and shore birds were everywhere.

After living in Tennessee for decades, I moved to Maryland. I was getting into wildlife photography. One day I was on the shore when all of a sudden I hear this big cannonball splash. It scared the daylights out of me. Next thing I know I see a bird coming out of the water, a big ol' fish in its beak. An osprey. It was the coolest thing I'd ever seen. From then on, I was hooked.

My motivation for founding the festival came soon after. A crew came in and euthanized fledgling ospreys nesting up in the lights at a local football field. That hit me hard.

I could've stayed mad, written complaints. But then I thought about it. What if I could come up with a way for people to learn about ospreys and why we should protect them? And that's how I ended up starting the Maryland Osprey and Nature Festival. We're going into our fourth year. Next year's festival date is April 5th, 2025.

All of it comes back to me as a little kid. You're outside all the time. You're just aware of your surroundings. I would love the rain - it cooled you off. When I visit Nicaragua, it's like I'm ten years old again, I go straight to where the ospreys are.



Left to right: Sal Icaza and his wife, Johanna Icaza.





Osprey.



The Maryland Osprey and Nature Festival, held in April 2024 at Drum Point Club, Lusby, MD.





VAL JARJURI 🇧🇴

Events Coordinator, Defensores de la Cuenca

*Neabasco Creek Boardwalk @ The Julie J. Metz Neabasco Creek Wetlands Preserve,
Woodbridge, VA*

I was three years old when my family moved to the US from Bolivia, and we moved a number of times when I was growing up. Starting school in a new place was always stressful. Exploring new trails in new places was always my favorite thing to do. It brought me calm.

I started with Defensores de la Cuenca as a volunteer. The first time I volunteered was at a campout. Three days connecting with nature – very cool! From there, it grew into a job opportunity.

I've always felt a deep bond with nature. I don't feel like society has ever put up obstacles to that. But through my work with Defensores, I have learned that this experience is not the case for every Latino person. That is why I am so gratified to work at Defensores. Abel Olivo, our Co-Founder and Executive Director, works hard to not only educate but also to uplift the Latino community.

For my photo shoot, my close friend Helena Byun and I, along with her two dogs, visited Neabasco Boardwalk and the Julie J. Metz Neabasco Creek Wetlands Preserve. I love living near Neabasco. You never know what adorable animal you're going to stumble across. Life can feel very fast and demanding with work and social obligations. Taking a walk in nature feels slower, in a good way. It also helps to stretch your legs after sitting behind a desk all day.





SERENELLA LINARES

Facility Director at Mount Rainier Nature Center & Mycologist
Patuxent River Park - Jug Bay Natural Area, Upper Marlboro, MD

It happened at age six walking with my grandmother by the tidal pools in Barceloneta, Puerto Rico. We watched a shrimp bringing its claws to its mouth but couldn't tell what it was holding. "Do you know what it's doing?" Grandma asked. "No." I replied. "I don't either," Grandma said, "But one thing I am certain about is that you will grow up, study and learn everything about nature, and then you'll come and teach me!" My path was set. Grandma became my first teacher and my first student, cementing my desire to learn and share nature knowledge with anyone who would listen.

As Director of Mount Rainier Nature Center, I cultivate a team of naturalists, sharing our knowledge and passion for the environment. My journey to this point wove through various scientific disciplines and experiences, always inspired by the magic of discovery. Patuxent River Park, where I was photographed, embodies that magic. Situated right by the river, the Park's wetland and forests are home to a diverse range of plant and fungi species.

I grew up in nature and have vivid memories filled with colors, smells, and flavors from home. It was only after moving to the continental US that I encountered the misconception that Latine people aren't present in outdoor spaces or the environmental movement. Yet, I see my community everywhere in nature – picnicking by rivers, playing soccer in parks, enjoying festivals filled with music, and taking weekend walks with our families. However we choose to connect, nature is a crucial part of us, and we certainly belong.





Serenella Linares at Mount Rainier Nature Center.

Veronica Tayviah, Park Naturalist.

NORBERTO MARTINEZ

Executive Director, Langley Park Civic Association, Inc.

Northwest Branch Stream Valley Park

As a child, I would get up at 5 am to plant corn; my father was a farmer and we planted corn, beans, squash, peppers, and tomatoes. Our plot was not large, maybe two acres spread around the ejido. An ejido is land owned by a community that is only passed on to relatives and cannot be sold.

Two mountain ranges run through Oaxaca state. Our family would walk to the mountains sometimes to get firewood, swim at the dam, or gather a seasonal fruit, anonas, by the creek. Our favorite spot was the dam, with soursop trees everywhere and a view of the town below.

As a teen, I developed a passion for planting – mostly fruit trees that I germinated from seeds. Sometimes people would come to my house to purchase a fruit tree such as orange, lemon, avocado, or other fruit. “Can you get me a mango tree?” “Sure, I can get you one.”

I’ve always been active in the community. I had been doing community work in Langley Park for years. We started the nonprofit during the pandemic so we could help residents even more. We began with stipends for people’s rent payments, food distribution, advocating for testing sites, you name it.

Our mission is to uplift the quality of life of residents in Langley Park. Our work has expanded to include forums on domestic violence, creek cleanups, family walks, EcoFamily Walks and much more. I’m hoping that the kids who attend stream monitoring events become scientists.

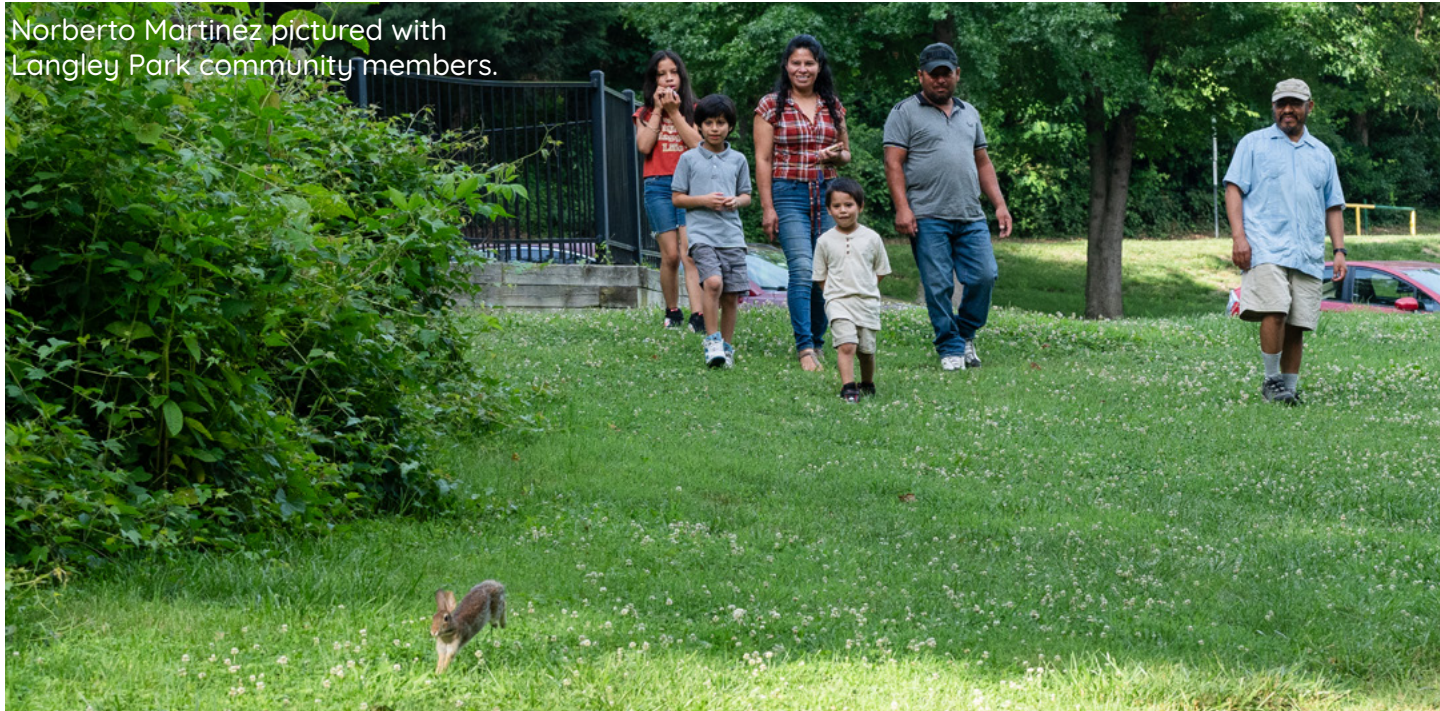


Norberto Martinez pictured with Langley Park community members.





Norberto Martínez pictured with Langley Park community members.



Collecting macroinvertebrates, which are identified and counted as part of Nature Forward's Water Quality Monitoring program.





🇩🇪 **MARÍA-ELENA MONTERO** 🇵🇷

President, DC Bird Alliance
Lake Artemesia, College Park, MD

Growing up, my Papi would tell me the names of birds in Spanish. He wasn't trying to mold a birder and I didn't even know I was birding! But everything I learned stoked my curiosity about nature - especially birds. If a Ruby-throated Hummingbird seemed like a bird worth seeing, then Joyita Volante (Little Flying Jewel) sounded even more exciting! I am so blessed to be who I am and that my Papi sparked a lifelong love affair with birds.

As I became more involved in bird organizations, what I grew to appreciate is how birding connects me to the simplest things we all tend to lose sight of amid the stressors of everyday life. Open air. Beautiful surroundings. The sound of a Carolina Wren. The whistle of a White-throated Sparrow. Birding teaches grace, patience, and resilience. Sometimes I just need to step outside to be reminded.

As a Cuban-Dominican Afro-Latina, I often feel like a rare bird myself, constantly explaining my identity. Mari-who? Mari-what? You're Spanish?!?! Birds don't discriminate, aren't biased, don't ignore me, don't block me, or unfriend me. We may speak different languages. We communicate in vastly different ways. But I am not judged and I wouldn't ever be disowned. In nature, I am instantly part of another family.

The outdoors - nature - is a space where I never have to explain myself, defend my pedigree, or prove my Spanish, my Latinidad. Belonging is the unconditional invitation to be. Simply, to be. Just as I am.





María-Elena Montero co-leads a DC Bird Alliance bird walk at Lake Artemesia.



American goldfinch.





ABEL OLIVO 🇲🇪

Co-Founder & Executive Director, Defensores de la Cuenca
Driskell Park, Hyattsville, MD

I'm fourth-generation Mexicano/Chicano, born in Texas, but I grew up in northwest Ohio. My family didn't have a lot of money, but we could always go and be in nature. We went on hikes and bike rides. We went fishing. We had a lot of fun.

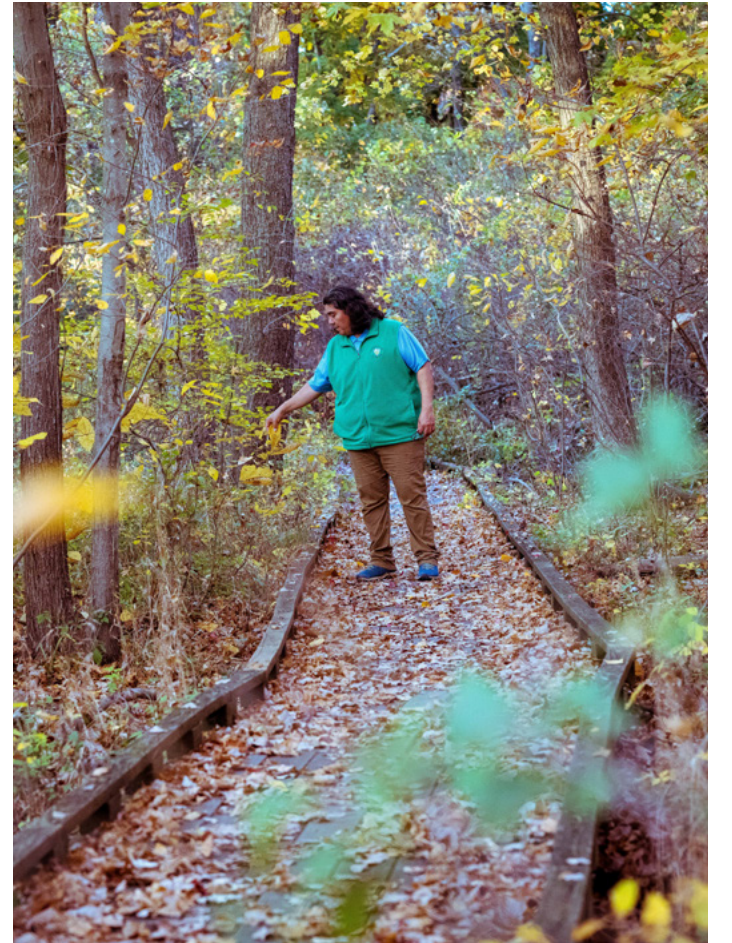
After working in policy for over a decade, I started Defensores de la Cuenca in the middle of the pandemic. People were suffering. There were environmental justice and social justice issues going on. They still go on. I noticed that many environmental organizations do programming, but there was a void in investing in the immigrant community in a deeper way, by preparing people for green economy jobs, and building them up as advocates and leaders.

We're growing. La Academia is our paid Spanish language training opportunity. In our Defensores Youth Corps, two young adults share their experiences in environmental stewardship as a way to educate program participants about green careers. And our Embajadores de los Árboles program is now expanding into Fairfax, Arlington, and Baltimore County with support from the US Forest Service's Urban and Community Forestry Program.

It goes back to my childhood. Me and my family would go to these places, and we would be the only Latinos there. It wasn't necessarily a welcoming space. But I made it my space. My approach was I'm going to be here because I want to be here. Defensores allows me to invite more people to have a feeling of belonging, a sense of ownership.



Defensores Youth Corps members and Defensores de la Cuenca staff remove invasives in Driskell Park.





BRENDA V. PÉREZ AMADOR 🇲🇽

Community Organizer, Environmentalist, Equity & Engagement Program Analyst at DC
Department of Energy and Environment

Boulder Bridge & Picnic Grove #14, Rock Creek Park, Washington, DC

My ancestral homelands are in Lagunas, a pueblito in the mountains of Puebla, Mexico. When I was ten years old, my siblings and I left Mexico following the path of the monarch butterflies, and came to Washington, DC. I am a Mexican-Washingtonian.

I was born in Netzahualcoyotl (Neza), a city and former shanty town that was built on the drained bed of Lake Texcoco. The Lake was drained by the Spanish during the colonization of Tenochtitlan. Growing up in Neza, I experienced first-hand the devastating ecological and structural consequences of the drainage of Lake Texcoco. I remember a heavy rain in Neza. I was about five years old, and I remember following my grandma to the entrance of the house. When she opened the door we saw a river where the street was supposed to be! My first instinct was to jump into the water, but my grandma yanked my arm before I could touch the water. I remember her saying that the water was dirty and told me not to touch it. Lake Texcoco looks very different now, but it's still there, fighting back.

I do this work for the love of my comunidad and la Madre Tierra. We are expressions of nature. We are not defending nature, we are nature defending itself. All of the plants, the animals, the trees, they are all relatives. They take care of us and we should take care of them as well.



Preparing elote.



Enjoying a picnic with family and friends at Picnic Grove #14 in Rock Creek Park.





LETIZIA RAMOS 🇨🇴

Youth Environmental Champion at the 2024 Naturally Latinos Conference
C&O Canal Towpath, in Washington, DC, & at Swain's Lock, Potomac, MD

The C&O is a place I frequent when I need to clear my mind. To me, it is a place of rest and revival. Recently, my dad and I traveled 120 miles by bike from Cumberland, MD, to Harper's Ferry, MD. In all honesty, it was a challenging experience that I won't soon repeat! The biking for the photo shoot was way more relaxed. I was photographed in Georgetown near the starting point of the C&O Towpath, and then at Swain's Lock, 16 miles upriver.

I was born in Bogotá, Colombia and we moved to the US when I was six. Colombia is one of the world's most biodiverse countries, and in fact has the greatest biodiversity of birds of any nation. Colombians are very loving people and this love extends to nature. Simultaneously, Colombia is a developing country looking for ways to balance economic growth with environmental sustainability and social equity and inclusion.

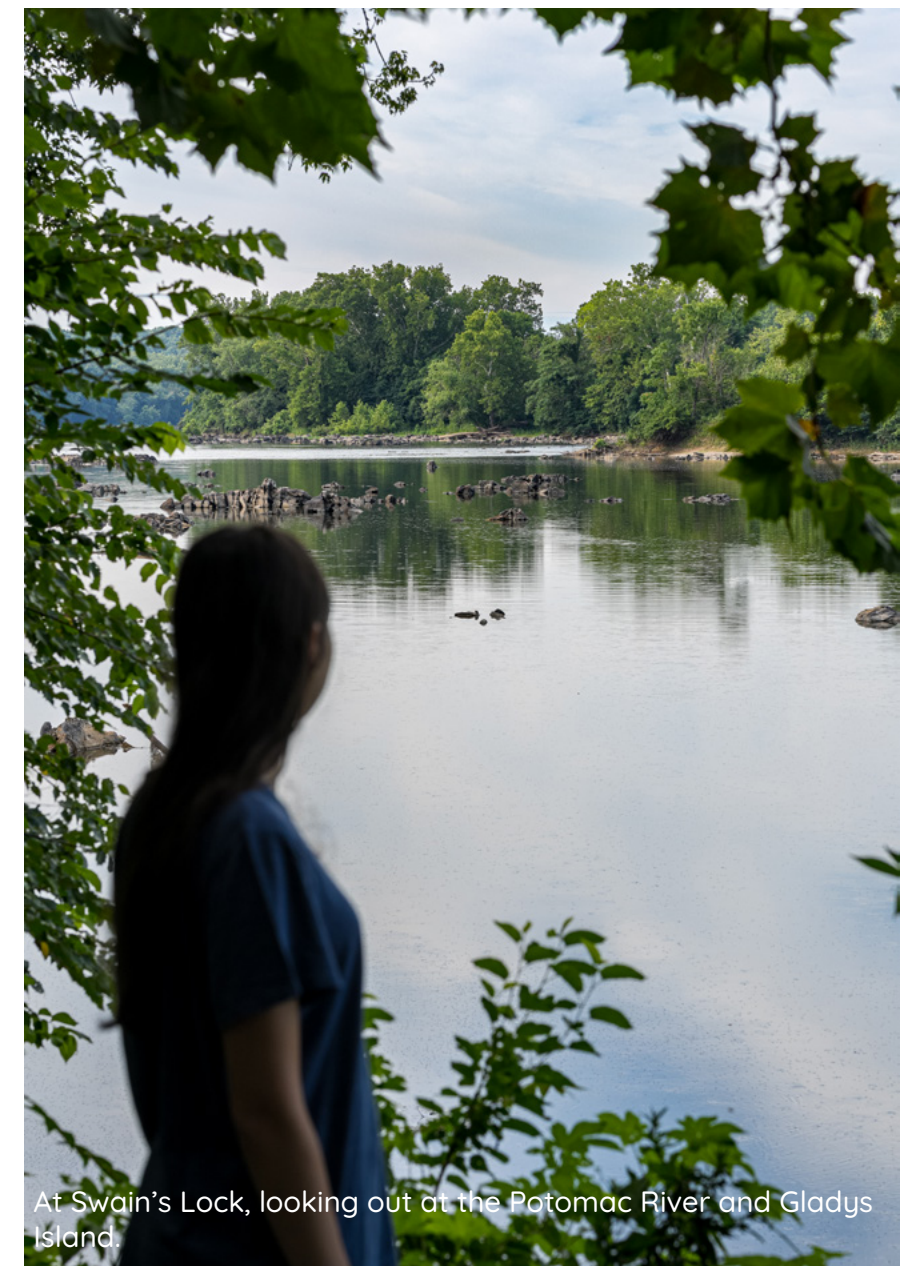
When I enter nature, my nationality and origins become irrelevant. Nature is a welcoming place that does not know borders and race, but rather is a place where everyone can find enjoyment regardless of history. Nature is a warm, rejuvenating place that resets my mind and calms my nerves.

I earned the Naturally Latinos Youth Environmental Champion award for my volunteering as a Volunteer with Peer Outreach With Energy Resources (POWER) educator. I believe that education is a powerful weapon against the rising climate crisis. Through environmental education I plant a seed that will prosper and contribute to a solution.





C&O Towpath in Georgetown near the Francis Scott Key Memorial Bridge, with Rosslyn, VA, in the background.



At Swain's Lock, looking out at the Patomac River and Gladys Island.





Left to right: Edgar Rodrigues and Jezmer Ramos.

JEZMER RAMOS |

Blair High School, Class of 2024 & Restaurant Manager & Participant, *Don't Pollute!*
 Long Branch Trail, Silver Spring, MD

Edgar and I have been friends since the fifth grade. We were helping out with food distribution to earn our Student Service Learning hours when Vanessa Pinto of CHEER [a nonprofit working in Long Branch] told us about *Don't Pollute!* Even before then, I noticed the trash in the stream increasing. Probably since Covid because there were fewer people picking it up during the whole lockdown, so trash accumulated.

The Purple Line construction was awful because it took down the Megamart. That store is what everybody needed. And then they just suddenly stopped the construction, so it just felt like a waste. [Purple Line construction largely paused from September 2020 to summer 2022.] I feel like if they were going to build the Purple Line, they shouldn't have stopped.

[About the smoke from forest fires in the summer of 2023.] I have asthma so it was really bad. I was on a five-minute walk and I had to stop on the sidewalk and, you know, wait it out. I didn't have my inhaler because I didn't think it would be bad, so I was just sitting there, coughing. The five-minute walk turned into a twenty-minute walk. I've been vthinking about the environment more since that happened because you never know the next time it's going to happen. I'm always reading up on the environment now. I'd never really done that before. My family watches Telemundo every night at 10 pm, but the news never talks about it.

EDGAR RODRIGUES |

Blair High School, Class of 2024 & Participant, *Don't Pollute!*
 Long Branch Trail, Silver Spring, MD

I used to live by the Flower Avenue Apartments and one day in middle school we were all like, "let's go to the stream." So we walked it. I mean we literally walked in the stream – with our feet submerged in the water. After that, we just made it an everyday thing. We would walk it the whole way down.

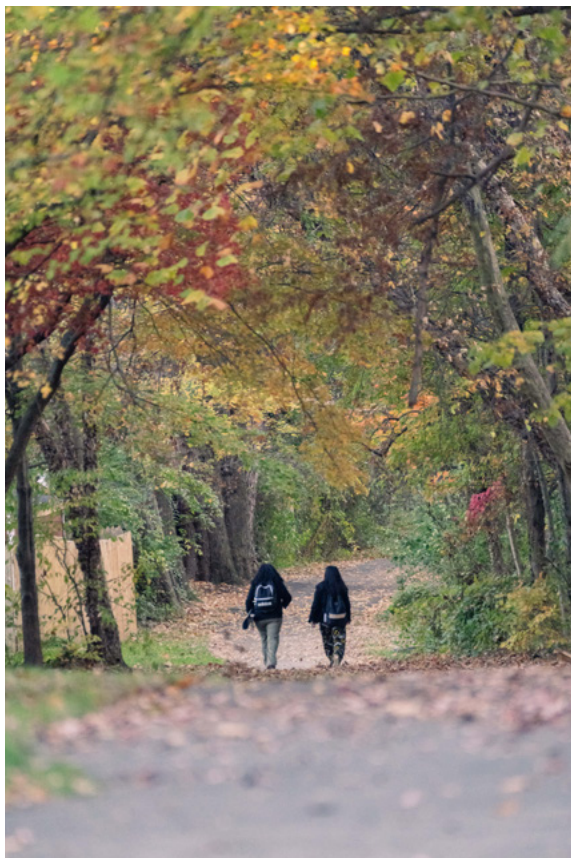
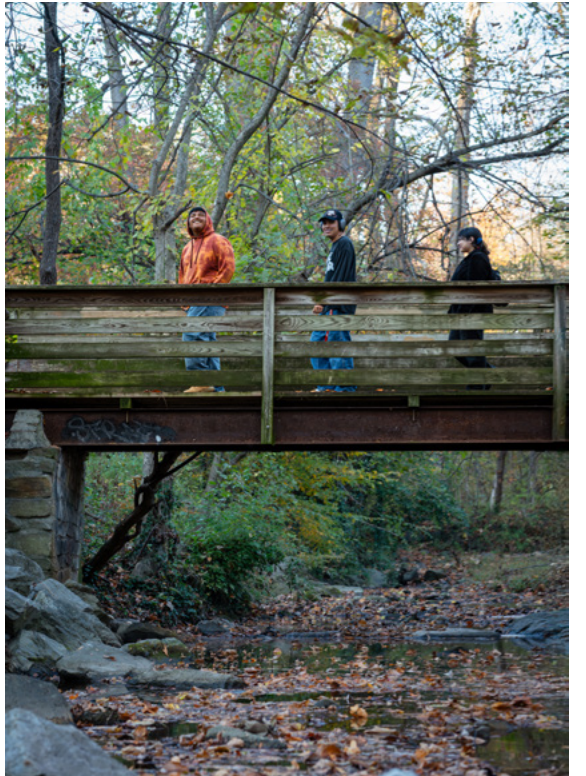
I like this area the most in autumn because the colors of the trees are beautiful.

[About the smoke from forest fires in the summer of 2023.] For me, I really like going outside. I do a bunch of nature therapy. But the smoke was really bad. During that time, I felt really bad.

I feel like Latinos and nature, well that's more like either plant-wise or animal-wise. My whole family likes gardens and flowers and all that stuff. And then animals too, you know, dogs, cats, and birds. My family likes to go to parks, beaches, and rivers too. We go fishing. Last year we went almost all the time.



Left to right: Edgar Rodrigues, Jezmer Ramos, and Dunya Siddique.





DUNYA SIDDIQUE 🇧🇷

Northwood High School, Class of 2023 & Participant, *Don't Pollute!*
Long Branch Trail, Silver Spring, MD

I like living in Silver Spring because you have access to trails, but you also live in an urban area. You have both. It's a good place to live like that because of that. I would go crazy if I didn't have access to so many different places.

I decided to participate in *Don't Pollute!* because the Long Branch stream is really close to my house. Growing up, I would play in it all the time. So when I heard about the initiative, I was like okay, seems cool.

I think the Purple Line will be good, but it's been taking years. Wayne Avenue is so busy and the construction is ugly. It's just taking a little too long. [Purple Line construction is 4½ years behind schedule].

Climate kind of makes me really existential because it makes me wonder if anything I'm doing matters. Is it going to be worth it to, you know, pursue something that's going to take a long time? So it's made me question my career choices. I mean I've really wanted to do law for a long time, and specifically go up against big companies that are doing a lot of harm. But at the same time, the environmental situation stresses me out because by the time I'm out of law school, is it going to be livable? It's getting exponentially worse. And I think a lot of people just don't think about it because it's scary. It used to make me angry, but now, I don't know...it's just like, disbelief.



Don't Pollute! was an initiative empowering BIPOC youth to lead litter reduction efforts in the Long Branch community. The nonprofits Nature Forward, CHEER, and Defensores de la Cuenca collaborated on the initiative, with funding provided by the Chesapeake Bay Trust.



JUAN RODRIGUEZ

Nature Facility Program Manager, Maryland-National Capital Park and
Planning Commission

Huntley Meadows Park, Alexandria, VA

My earliest experience of nature was when my parents took me to our farm in the countryside of Comerio, Puerto Rico. I have vivid memories of walking through the lush forest, smelling the clean air high in the mountains.

My grandfather was a farmer in the early 1900s and his passion for animals influenced my older brother. When we moved to the mainland in the early 1980s my brother continued his interest in animals by taking care of injured pigeons - after seeing that, I also took up caring for injured pigeons and stray cats here in DC. From caring for sick and stray animals to visiting and later working at the Smithsonian's National Zoo, my youthful fascination with animals set the course for my life's work. Later, I went on a six-week kayak expedition to southeast Alaska with the Wild Rockies Field Institute, my passion for nature and wildlife crystalized and pushed me to where I am today.

As Director of Clearwater Nature Center, I manage a team dedicated to connecting people with the natural world. Our 56-year-old facility, surrounded by an ecologically important mature forest, offers sanctuary for both wildlife and visitors. We foster a sense of belonging in the great outdoors by making nature accessible and welcoming to everyone.

Having had the good fortune to be exposed to the natural world from a young age, I have always had a sense of belonging to nature. This world belongs to all of us - the human race.





The Clearwater Nature Center Bird Facility, in Clinton, MD.



The indoor turtle pond at the Clearwater Nature Center, in Clinton, MD.



JOE TOOLAN (JOSÉ MANUEL) | 🇺🇸 🇬🇧

Philanthropic and Community Advocate

Quiet Waters Park, Annapolis, MD

I was born in Guatemala, but as a baby I was adopted into an American family. During my upbringing in Maryland, I was privileged to have access to nature. From a young age, I was able to find refuge there. I needed it. As a queer kid of color in a white community, I knew I was different. Nature was the only space where I was not judged. I could be myself. Nature is one of the only places where we all get the opportunity to leave societal expectations behind, sit in silence, and learn to be us, genuinely.

That bond with nature never went away. After college, I gravitated to the environmental field. In my role with GreenLatinos, I work to ensure that those who have been historically excluded in this field have a voice in our work. I work to shift the narrative in grantmaking entities to ensure that BIPOC and LGBTQ+ people have a place at the table. On that front, we've made a lot of progress in recent years, but we still need to see more people in leadership roles.

These days, I love to be outside in the woods for morning or late afternoon walks. The rustling of leaves in the wind, the crunch of dry leaves fallen under my feet. The greens and browns of the woods, plantitas, and moss, and the smell of fresh air. To this day, all of it brings me back to my childhood. I work to make my inner child happy.







KASEY MARIA YTURRALDE 🇲🇽

Urban and Community Forestry Program Specialist, USDA Forest Service

Marvin Gaye Park, Washington, DC

My path to urban and community forestry started in our front yard, under the eucalyptus trees that are so common in California. I was looking for insects. My siblings were quite a bit older and so I spent a lot of time on my own. I loved watching butterflies, painted ladies in particular. Studying their strange insect bodies and a tongue that rolled up underneath their head, I had to know more. I set up a classroom in our garage with specimens mounted with pins from my Mom's sewing kit, and taught my nieces about insect anatomy.

As I got older, I explored more widely. The Santa Ana River was nearby and was the first place I could go to experience nature by myself.

Eventually I found my way to the School of Forestry at Northern Arizona University where I studied how bark beetles use sound to navigate their way in the world. When I moved to DC, the city had openings in the urban forestry department. I applied, and I've been learning and spreading the word about city trees ever since.

Curiosity about the natural world started me on my path to forestry, where I've spent many hours outside studying insects and trees. I think about how my Dad spent a lot of time outside, working in construction. His experience, like many Latinos who work outside and are exposed to the heat and sun, brings urgency to my work now. Planting and maintaining healthy trees can help cool where we live and work.



Measuring trunk diameter of an American sycamore using a Diameter Tape (D-tape).



River birch.



A measurement is taken at approximately 4.5 ft high on the tree (DBM, diameter at breast height), a standard method for measuring trees that dates back to Gifford Pinchot, the first Chief of the Forest Service.

PLACES IN THE BOOK

District of Columbia

[C&O Canal Towpath](#)

Georgetown, Washington, DC

[Constitution Gardens](#)

at the National Mall, Washington DC
Constitution Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20024
Open: 24 hours

[Kenilworth Park & Aquatic Gardens](#)

1550 Anacostia Ave NE, Washington, DC 20019
Open: 8 am to 4 pm

[Marvin Gaye Park](#)

5200 Foote St NE, Washington, DC 20019

Maryland

[C&O Canal Towpath](#)

at Swain's Lock, Potomac, MD
10700 Swains Lock Rd, Potomac, MD

[Clearwater Nature Center](#)

11401 Thrift Rd, Clinton, MD 20735
Open Tuesday-Saturday: 10 a.m to 5 pm
Sunday: 10 am to 4 pm

[David C. Driskell Community Park](#)

3911 Hamilton St., Hyattsville, MD 20781

[Long Branch Trail](#)

Silver Spring, MD 20912
Open: Sunrise to sunset

[Mount Rainier Nature Center](#)

4701 31st Pl, Mt Rainier, MD 20712
Open: Tuesday-Saturday: 10 am to 5 pm

[Northwest Branch Stream Valley Park](#)

8402 Riggs Road Hyattsville, MD

[Patuxent River Park - Jug Bay Natural Area](#)

16000 Croom Airport Rd,
Upper Marlboro, MD 20772
Open: Monday-Sunday, 8 am to dusk

[Quiet Waters Park](#) *(Park has fees)*

600 Quiet Waters Park Rd, Annapolis, MD 21403
Open: 7 am to dusk.

[Rachel Carson Conservation Park](#)

22201 Zion Rd, Olney, MD 20833
Open: Sunrise to sunset

[RedGate Park](#)

14500 Avery Rd, Rockville, MD 20853

[Soldiers Delight Natural Environment Area](#)

5100 Deer Park Road, Owings Mills MD 21117
Open: 9 am to Sunset

[2024 Maryland Osprey and Nature Festival](#)

The 2024 festival took place at Drum Point Club, Lusby, MD. Next year's event will be held in the town of North Beach, MD on April 5th, 2025

Virginia

[Green Spring Gardens](#)

4603 Green Spring Rd, Alexandria, VA 22312
Open: dawn to dusk

[Huntley Meadows Park](#)

3701 Lockheed Blvd, Alexandria, VA 22306
Open: 4 am to 7 pm

[The Julie J. Metz Neabsco Creek Wetlands Preserve](#)

15875 Neabsco Rd, Woodbridge, VA 22191

[Mason Neck State Park](#) *(Park has fees)*

7301 High Point Rd, Lorton, VA 22079
Open: Oct. 1-April 30, 7 am to dusk. May 1-Sept. 30, 6 am to dusk.

[Meadowlark Botanical Gardens](#) *(Park has fees)*

9750 Meadowlark Gardens Ct, Vienna, VA 22182
Open: November-March, 10 a.m to 4 pm
April-October, 10 am to 7 pm

[Neabsco Creek Boardwalk](#)

15125 Blackburn Rd, Woodbridge, VA 22191

BEHIND THE VISUALS

Gabriela Paola Franco Peña, 
Photographer, Graphic Designer,
Illustrator

Since 2015, Gabriela, a Salvadoran visual artist, has worked with a range of nonprofits focused on social and environmental justice. Currently, Gabriela is the Educational Multimedia Producer at Conservation Nation. Conservation Nation works to diversify the conservation movement by funding and supporting conservationists from underrepresented communities while educating and inspiring the next generation of leaders. In 2022, Gabriela illustrated and designed *Belonging: The Black Americans in Nature Photography Project*. You can discover more of her work at gabrielapaola.com.



Benjamin A. Israel
Photographer

Benjamin has been Staff Photographer/Videographer for Nature Forward since 2018. His photos are regularly featured in Nature Forward quarterly magazine, on Nature Forward's website, and on its social media platforms. Benjamin's photography has also appeared in *American Forests Magazine*, *Chesapeake Bay Magazine*, *Bethesda Magazine*, and the *Washington Post*. For Nature Forward and Heritage Montgomery, he directed the documentary film, *The Land of Woodend* (2019), which explores the historical legacy and impact of the Woodend Nature Sanctuary in Chevy Chase, MD. Benjamin was one of the photographers for *Belonging: The Black Americans in Nature Photography Project* (2022).

THANK YOU!

Community. It is the core of Latinx joy and Latinx thriving. From the moment we started to think about this book, we knew community had to be reflected in its content. Behind the scenes, the same theme prevailed. Completing this book would not have been possible without the creative contributions of dozens of generous people over this past year of production. This special community propelled us forward the entire time. It is only by virtue of this community's labor, support, advice, and expertise that we were able to make this ambitious project a reality.

We want to thank:

Each of the amazing people featured in the book for their trust, openness, and enthusiasm for the project.

USDA Forest Service's Urban and Community Forestry Program (UCF) for its work to improve the conditions of forests in urban communities, and for making Nature Forward's Naturally Latinos and Taking Nature Black conferences part of your mission.

The Nature Forward staff

Lydia Lawrence and Katrina Weinig

Denisse Guitarra and Eliza Cava

Serenella Linares

Amy Ritsko-Warren

Lisa Goodnight and Kristin Cook

María-Elena Montero

Friends of Sligo Creek

M-NCPPC

Laurie Israel and Elaine Sidney

Ena Ursula Peña Peña

Zayra Márquez

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Caroline Brewer, author, past Taking Nature Black Conference chair, and creator of the Belonging series, fueling it with her vision, artistic direction, writing, and energy.

- Gabriela Paola Franco Peña and Benjamin A. Israel

WHO WE ARE

Nature Forward:

Our Mission: Nature Forward inspires residents of the greater Washington, DC, region to appreciate, understand, and protect their natural environment through outdoor experiences, education, and advocacy.

Our Vision: Nature Forward seeks to create a larger and more diverse community of people who treasure the natural world and work to preserve it.

Nature Forward
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www.natureforward.org

Follow Nature Forward at:
[www.Facebook.com/GoNatureForward](https://www.facebook.com/GoNatureForward)
[www.Twitter.com/gonatureforward](https://www.twitter.com/gonatureforward)
[www.Instagram.com/gonatureforward](https://www.instagram.com/gonatureforward)

Naturally Latinos:

Themed “Perteneciendo: Nuestras Raíces, Nuestra Tierra” (Belonging: Our Roots, Our Earth), Nature Forward’s 2024 Naturally Latinos Conference featured inspiring environmental thought leaders and advocates during two virtual and one in-person day of presentations and performances. The event also included two days of outdoor nature experiences.

Since its launch in 2017, Naturally Latinos has become one of the nation’s premier environmental forums showcasing diversity, inclusion, and equity. Although centered primarily on issues impacting the Capital Region, the event’s focus on environmental justice, empowerment, and belonging in nature resonates with diverse nature professionals and advocates from coast to coast and around the globe who face similar challenges in their own communities.

Learn more about Nature Forward’s conferences here: <https://natureforward.org/conferences/>

Urban and Community Forestry, US Forest Service, US Department of Agriculture (USDA):

The Forest Service Urban & Community Forestry Program is a technical, financial, and educational assistance program, delivering nature-based solutions to ensure a resilient and equitable tree canopy where more than 84 percent of Americans live. By working with our state partners and community tree groups, the program invests from the ground up in communities, improving more than 140 million acres of urban and community forest across the United States.

USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.

Learn more here:
<https://www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/urban-forests/ucf>

USDA Forest Service
201 14th Street, SW
Washington, DC 20250
Urban & Community Forestry Program
<https://www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/urban-forests/ucf>



