

Maricela Morales: Authentic Activism Brings Visionary Change

Maricela Morales sits across from me in a modest office tucked away in the back of Ventura's Sperry Avenue office complex. Perched on the edge of her seat, she leans into our conversation as only a skilled community organizer would. "Tell me about your activism...What do your parents think of your particular worldview...Do you have siblings?" Her impeccable interpersonal skills are telling of her history as an accomplished activist and civil servant. Now, the Executive Director of the Central Coast Alliance for a Sustainable Economy (CAUSE), Maricela Morales has devoted her life to achieving social, economic, and environmental justice for vulnerable communities across California.

Morales was born to Mexican immigrants in Fillmore, California -- a small agricultural community in Ventura County. After school, she spent her days helping her parents at their corner grocery store. As small business owners, Morales says her parents barely made ends meet. It was in the setting of that mom and pop store that Morales began to develop her social consciousness. The store's clientele were primarily farmworker families. "I saw the difference between us and those children. We were poor but it was clear that they were poorer." Morales became cognizant of divisions in class and wealth at a young age and it was this awareness that has shaped her world view. "I've always felt very sensitive to folks being not cared for and...feeling emotionally like I wanted to help."

Motivated by the desire to help, Morales decided she wanted to pursue a medical career at just ten years-old because, as she saw it, "doctors end suffering." From this point on, everything she did became oriented towards accomplishing this goal. At 13 she got her first paid internship as a public health assistant at a local clinic. In high school, she became a certified nursing assistant and worked part time at a skilled nursing facility. At Stanford, she studied Human Biology. As a pre-med student at one of the nation's top universities, Morales gained ample experience in the medical arena, but, it was this experience that convinced her to change gears. "I realized that was not how I wanted to interact with people. Working in clinics felt too mechanistic." With a passion for interpersonal connection, Morales took on a social-science-heavy load. Though she graduated with a degree in Biology, her emphasis, "Social factors that impact the individual," is a more accurate indicator of what drives her activism. She went on to do a year of faith-based service with the Covenant House helping homeless and runaway teens in Hollywood. Morales was raised Catholic, but today, she says it's the essence of religion that resonates with her. "For me, the wisdom traditions come back to the same thing. We are all one, we are all interconnected, we are all whole, we are all of value." Morales has

dedicated her life's work to recognizing and affirming these truths in every individual, particularly those who have been undervalued by society. Her firmly held belief that "nobody is better or worse than anybody else," has driven her to fight for the rights of immigrants, workers, and vulnerable classes.

After working in the nonprofit sector post-graduation, Morales decided to pursue a career as a Marriage and Family Therapist (MFT). This time, her dream landed her at the Pacifica Graduate Institute where she earned her MA in counselling psychology. It was during this time that she started volunteering with the Living Wage Coalition, an alliance of organizations united to increase the minimum wage in the city of Ventura. Because the minimum wage is set at the state and federal level, it's rarely increased to reflect the cost of living in regions where expenses are above average. "We needed to figure out what we could do at the local level to make some headway," says Morales. For her, this grassroots work epitomizes the function of advocacy organizations like CAUSE. "In the broadest sense we are about democracy," she says. By acting as an intermediary between individuals and policy makers, Morales is working to create a more robust democracy that reflects the diversity of our society. "For us to really reach the ideal of a thriving, authentic democracy we need to invest because nothing that matters just happens."

The Living Wage Coalition became institutionalized with the founding of CAUSE in 2001. Morales finished up her MA at Pacifica and came on board as Assistant Executive Director with Marcos Vargas, the original founder of the Living Wage Coalition and former Executive Director of CAUSE. In the beginning, CAUSE was a policy and coalition building organization. Their work consisted of identifying issues in the community and using organizational power to advance research-based solutions to the state and national level, but in 2006 their work took on a new dimension with community organizing. Morales, and her colleagues, began engaging community members in conversations about their values and concerns in order to gain a deeper understanding of their constituents' needs. This kind of community organizing satisfied Morales' desire to connect with people on the most personal level. It's this passion for interpersonal connection that links her series of diverse career moves. From deciding against becoming a doctor because the work was too "mechanistic" to pursuing an MA in counselling psychology, Morales has always been driven by the potential to connect with people on a deeper level. As the leader of CAUSE, Morales believes winning policy issues is secondary to the transformational power of interpersonal engagement. Individuals that have been marginalized from the political process become empowered to own their voice, and through their participation, their concerns become validated and

their inherent worth acknowledged and affirmed. “People are never the same. They have been transformed,” Morales beams.

Morales was promoted to the Executive Director of CAUSE in 2015, and has since become a celebrated activist by organizations across California, including the California Association of Leadership Programs and the National Women’s Political Caucus of Ventura County. In 2016, State Senator Hannah Beth Jackson named Morales “Woman of the Year” for her district. Morales welcomes these recognitions as an affirmation of the work, but says they are a victory for social justice, not herself. For Morales, they signal to the community that social justice matters and community engagement is a legitimate means of affecting change, but, she says, “My value is the same. It continues to be the same, regardless.”

CAUSE’s most recent campaign has been protecting tenants in Santa Barbara County from unjust rent hikes and eviction by landlords. [Low-income families in Santa Barbara have become increasingly vulnerable to eviction](#) as landlords seeking to profit from the inflated real estate market push out long-time renters in favor of resource rich property buyers. CAUSE’s Tenant Rights Ordinance demands that landlords have a fair reason for evicting their tenants and promises relocation assistance for low-income renters. But securing the basics, like housing, is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to achieving real social and economic justice. Morales’ vision for humanity is that these basic securities become fundamental rights, because when people are denied the essentials they are robbed of their opportunity to dream. It is the ability to thrive, not just survive, that enables us to enrich the world with our potential, she says. “Who knows what the world would be like if everyone had the opportunity to really flourish. I have no doubt [it] would be phenomenal.”