

Robert García '78 (BA '74) Connects the Dots for Environmental Justice

After serving on the Stanford Law Review's Board of Editors during his last year of law school, Robert García collaborated with some of the Civil Rights Movement's giants. Now he is one of those "giants." García directs The City Project at the Center for Law in the Public Interest, a national non-profit law firm in Los Angeles. The City Project works with diverse coalitions in strategic campaigns to improve parks and recreation, playgrounds, schools, and transit for the poorer areas of the city. Its mission is "to achieve equal justice, democracy, and livability for all the people of the Los Angeles region ... by connecting the historical dots to understand why the City is the way it is, and how it could be better."

Before joining the City Project, García served as Assistant United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York, prosecuting organized crime, public corruption, and international narcotics trafficking cases. He then served as Western Regional Counsel with the NAACP Legal Defense & Educational Fund, Inc. He has taught at both Stanford and UCLA law schools. García has published widely on law and society, with a chapter on the urban park movement forthcoming in Dr.

Robert Bullard's book on environmental justice. His chapter on equal access to the California coast will appear in a book by Columbia Law School about the national civil rights roll back. The Planning and Conservation League recently created the Robert García Environmental Justice Award named in his honor and made him the first recipient, citing his work to improve the environment for all the people of California, particularly in Los Angeles.

As Director of the City Project, García sees himself as a problem solver for whom impact litigation is a last resort and only in the context of a broader campaign. His approach is creative and interdisciplinary. In the Los Angeles River Project, for example, he combined the visionary work of the late Frederick Law Olmsted with the central lessons of the environmental justice movement. In 1930, Olmsted had developed a comprehensive

park, recreation, open space, and circulation plan for Los Angeles, which García recognized as a potential blueprint for bringing open space and recreational opportunities to downtown L.A. Combining Olmsted and environmental justice, García built a coalition of low-income and minority groups to stop federal

funding for a 32-acre warehouse project and secure \$35 million to create a state park in the Cornfield, an abandoned and contaminated rail



Cornfield in downtown Los Angeles

yard along the Los Angeles River that is the last large open space in downtown LA and part of Olmsted's original plan.

The Los Angeles Times referred to the park as a "heroic monument" and a "symbol of hope." The BBC is producing a half hour documentary featuring the City Project's work on the Los Angeles River. To Olmsted's plan, García added the insights of what he considers the four central lessons of the environmental justice movement: "that communities of

color and low income communities disproportionately suffer from environmental degradation, are disproportionately denied the benefits of public wealth like parks and recreation, do not have adequate information to understand the impact of public policy decisions on their lives, and are denied full and fair public participation in the decision-making process."

The City Project's strategy for addressing environmental justice problems is a multifaceted approach that puts the affected community at the center. First, the project helps communities develop their own "vision." Second, it engages in active coalition building and public education both to learn what people want and to find collective ways of getting it. Third, the project helps people undertake public policy and legal advocacy outside the courts by showing them how to participate in planning and administrative processes, as well as ballot measures and election campaigns. Fourth, the project assists with strategic media campaigns. Fifth, it engages in extensive research and analysis,



A locked gate with barbed ribbon wire blocks access to public beach in Malibu. The sign at right reads: "Right to pass by permission and subject to control of owner."

including complex demographic analyses using census data and GIS mapping tools, to illuminate inequities. Sixth, the project "creatively engages opponents to find common ground." When all else fails, and only within the context of a broader campaign, the project turns to impact litigation.

García's work at the City Project is back on the front pages of the Los Angeles Times and has become a featured topic in Gary Trudeau's Doonesbury comic strip. He's now taking on the touchy subject of equal access to California's beaches. And he's gone straight to the wealthiest communities in the Los Angeles metropolitan region to prove his point. Why are parks and beach access important to the City Project's fundamental mission? According to García, public access to beaches, like parks, is integral to democracy and equality. "Beaches are a commons where the democratic vision can be expressed in everyday life," explains García. "In a democratic society, our commons should not be privatized." García cites in support a decision of the Connecticut Supreme Court two years ago that held that a municipality may not constitutionally restrict access to a beach to its own residents and their guests on the ground that non-residents have a First Amendment right of access to exercise free speech. [Brenden P. Leydon v. Town of Greenwich, 257 Conn. 318 (Ct.2001)].

García is quick to point out that "what is at stake is not just the beach. . . . The fundamental values at

stake are equal justice, democracy through full and fair participation in the decision making process, and livability for all." That's García's way of connecting the dots. For more information about the City Project, visit <http://www.clipi.org/cityproject.html>.



Guatemalan Nobel Peace Laureate Rigoberta Menchu recently joined Robert (in rear, second from left) to call for the creation of parks in the inner city as "a way of saying no to violence, no to war." This is one of Robert's proudest moments, as he came to the United States from Guatemala at the age of four.

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