**CELEBRATING EARTH WEEK: Environmental Justice and Community Health with Nalleli Cobo, Climate Activist Episode 198**

Nalleli Cobo [00:00:00]:

If we mobilize, if we make our noise, if we stand together in solidarity with one another, we can create this change. And we can demand the fossil fuel industry to stay away and to phase out and to show our government that it's choosing people's health over profit and not the other way.

Tania Anders [00:00:22]:

Welcome, dear listeners, to the Mount San Antonio College podcast. My name is Tanya Anders, your host for today's episode. My guest is Nayeli Coppo, Mount Sacs keynote speaker for the 2024 Earth Week events. Nayeli, thank you so much for taking time to visit with me.

Nalleli Cobo [00:00:43]:

I'm so happy to be here.

Tania Anders [00:00:45]:

Thank you. Before we start chatting, I wanted to give a brief introduction to this amazing young woman. Nayeli grew up in south Los Angeles and launched her career as an environmental activist as a nine year old. After noticing foul smells emanating from the oil well across the street from her home, she led a grassroot campaign to permanently shut down a toxic oil drilling site in her community in March of 2020 at the young age of 19. This oil site has caused serious health issues for her and others. Nayeli led a citizens movement, then initiated the process to phase out the largest urban oil field in the United States. Nayeli's story and leadership also inspired the enactment of Senate Bill 1137, which bans all new oil wells within 3200ft of communities in California. Nayeli won the 2022 Goldman Environmental Prize, was named on the 2022 time 100 next list, California Energy Commission hall of Fame activist of the year, agenda of Cambio and more.

Tania Anders [00:01:57]:

Nayeli, we are so honored that you have come to visit our campus and welcome once again. So I want to start out our conversation with a little bit of an introduction about yourself. So can you please share with our listeners a little about your background and what it meant to grow up in your southern Los Angeles neighborhood?

Nalleli Cobo [00:02:16]:

Of course, when growing up next to an oil well, everything changes. It's not your typical neighbor who wakes up at five in the morning to mow the lawn or a dog that barks all night. It's truly a toxic, silent killer and your life is at risk. And growing up, in my personal experience, next to this oil and gas well, I got really sick at the age of nine. I started experiencing nosebleeds, headaches, stomach pains. My nosebleeds got so intense I could no longer sleep in my own bed. I would sleep in a chair to prevent choking on my own blood at night or I developed asthma. That's something I'm always going to have to live with.

Nalleli Cobo [00:02:51]:

Now, I had heart palpitations. And I used a heart monitor for several weeks. I had body spasms and my mom would have to carry me from one place to the other because I couldn't move. And unfortunately, it wasn't just me, it was most of my community, it was my entire family that was experiencing symptoms at this capacity. My mom developed asthma at 40, which is really rare. My grandma developed asthma at 70, which is even more rare and unheard of in newts. Different ways that our lives are being impacted by the fossil fuel industry, from young ages such as nine, to older ages such as 70, it's all stages of life being impacted.

Tania Anders [00:03:31]:

So you mentioned your family was impacted. Were some of your friends that you went to school with also impacted in a similar way?

Nalleli Cobo [00:03:39]:

Yeah. It was very common for us to have to stop class because someone was experiencing an asthma attack. Or I remember one time we were taking a state test and teachers would be so careful, like, don't drink your water next to this test. You can't get your test dirty. And there was a friend of mine who had a nosebleed all over his exam. We were so worried because, oh, my gosh, our test. But it was, again, the spontaneousness of it of any time, any place these symptoms could come about.

Tania Anders [00:04:10]:

Yeah. So you all really understood what you're all going through. So you became an activist, environmental activist at a very young age then. And how did you then realize that this is the path that I need to take. I need to speak up, I need to become active. And then maybe more importantly for our listeners also, then how did you go about becoming an activist for the environment?

Nalleli Cobo [00:04:33]:

So I did begin my activism when I was nine. I never knew that I was an activist. I didn't learn the word activist until I was eleven. And it was because a reporter had asked me, how does it feel to be an activist? And I asked her to pause the recording and explain this new word she had just thrown at me. And it was learning that I grew up in a community made up of activists, but we didn't have the vocabulary behind it. We grew up taking sustainable actions in our day to day lives without knowing we were being sustainable. And for me, no one ever believes, but I was an extremely shy girl. Like, I would not talk to my own shadow.

Nalleli Cobo [00:05:07]:

Growing up, I was attached to my mom by the hip. And my activism is what brought me out of my shell. It was seeing how my community was being impacted, how my family was being impacted, seeing how so many of our parents would go to door to door knocking after school or how they would have these conversations day and night about their children and their well being. How could I not talk or to my neighbor about this? How could I not go door to door knocking when I had to study after school schedule? My community, it's the most vibrant, hard working community I could think of. It was people that were working 14 to 16 hours days, and they were still willing to go door to door knocking for 2 hours after. Or. I remember one time we had a city hall hearing, and one of our neighbors, she really couldn't go testify. She said, it's my first day off in two weeks.

Nalleli Cobo [00:05:54]:

I'm really behind at work. But what I can do to help the community is anyone who has their kids, they can come drop off their kids and I'll have my house like a daycare center. You guys don't have to worry about it. I get my stuff done and you guys can all go for the community. Looking back, I felt bad because we left her house a mess and she was trying to clean it. But it was that sense of unity that we had. It was a sense of family and community that we will stand up for one another. I'm a very proud daughter of two immigrants, and something my mom has always said is that when she came to this country, she never thought she'd have to fight an oil well for her kids.

Nalleli Cobo [00:06:29]:

That's the reality that so many parents have. They come here in search of giving us a life they could only dream of. And to know that their kids are being poisoned in their home, that they're being poisoned their own home, it's. How would you not stand up and fight back?

Tania Anders [00:06:42]:

Yeah, it sounds like that saying it takes a village really is so true. And that's amazing. That's a beautiful story. And so I guess one of the messages is you need to rally others around you in particular, when it is a huge, huge impact like this particular one has been. So I'm curious, what were some things you accomplished for your neighborhood then?

Nalleli Cobo [00:07:09]:

The biggest is that this oil well that I grew up next to is now permanently closed. And that's historic. I remember the day we found out they were temporarily closing. We were having a family dinner. We were eating potato soup, I remember, and my mom got a work call and she excused herself and she started crying. I started poking her, and I was like, what's wrong? Who is it? What's going on? And she said, they're closing. And I was so happy, I asked for permission to scream inside of the house. And I started jumping up and down and I ran to the window and I opened it.

Nalleli Cobo [00:07:43]:

Something that was so simple, but for years we couldn't do because if we opened a window, we would trigger asthma attacks. The toxic emissions would come into her home, and you couldn't get the smell out for hours. And after, like, 10 seconds, I closed it because it was too cold for me. It was mid November, but it was the ability that now we could open that window in our homes. And that was something that we had been fighting for for over a decade, and we had done it.

Tania Anders [00:08:07]:

Wow. So it took a decade. That would have been one of my next questions. Like, you have to stick with it, right? Never lose hope and keep your team strong. Right. And pull people with you. So through this journey, I'm curious, who are some people maybe that you have met through this journey in LA, and then also at some point beyond LA, because you are an activist now that really travels all over, not just the country, but also the world. So let's start with the more local.

Tania Anders [00:08:38]:

What are some meetings you've attended and people that you've met through your activism?

Nalleli Cobo [00:08:44]:

I've been very fortunate to meet a variety of people within my ten years as an activist, but I feel like the people that always inspire you the most are the communities. To hearing different stories of how different online community members are mobilizing their communities, seeing how they're raising their fists into the air and vocalizing their demand for basic human rights, the need for basic human rights, and seeing how, despite where we are in the nation, when it comes to fossil fuel industries, our symptoms are the same from here to Colorado, a lot of asthma from here and Cancer Valley, there's a lot of cancer. Seeing how the science is there.

Tania Anders [00:09:24]:

Yeah.

Nalleli Cobo [00:09:25]:

How long until we are valued properly, listened to, until we are properly shutting down these facilities and transitioning with a just transition way to clean, renewable energies? Because that's what we need. And I mean, one in five deaths worldwide is due to fossil fuel pollution. We shouldn't wait for that number to get higher. We should be doing everything we can to reverse that, because that is preventable death. And those are people that are missing from their families dinner tables, that are missing from creating memories from their families and having conversations with their loved ones. If we mobilize, if we make our noise, if we stand together in solidarity with one another, we can create this change and we can demand the fossil fuel industry to stay away and to phase out and to show our government that it's choosing people's health over profit and not the other way.

Tania Anders [00:10:18]:

Yeah. You after a decade, accomplished a major milestone for your community. You now, like we mentioned, travel the globe. Has your environmentalism shifted in some way? Way, or what are some goals you're pursuing now?

Nalleli Cobo [00:10:33]:

My grandma asked me such a similar question yesterday, actually. And it's funny to say I never thought I would be where I am today with my activism. When I began, it was to open the window in my home. And then I realized, oh, there's more communities like mine. And we're not the only community that has an oil well as their neighbor. Oh, it's the county of Los Angeles. Oh, my gosh, the state of California. We have almost 3 million Californians living a mile or less to an active oil and gas well.

Nalleli Cobo [00:10:59]:

Then I learned the very alarming statistic that in the United States, there's 18 million Americans living a mile or less to an active oil and gas well. And my activism has been, like, evolving in that sense of, I go wherever I feel that the work is needed, or wherever I feel my heart is within the work. And I'm very aware that urban oil extraction is an odd cup of tea. But it was my upbringing that brought me into this. And I'm like any other 23 year old girl, you know, I love music and dancing and Justin Bieber, we were just talking about him. But it my passion, that my upbringing showed me my passion at a much earlier age, and I just haven't let go.

Tania Anders [00:11:39]:

We all have to thank you for that, because not everybody has that courage or brings up that courage, or thinks about their path differently. So it's really amazing. Since this is a podcast for our campus community, I was wondering if you have any advice, especially for our students, but really, all the entire campus community who would like to become a leader of change? Like, what are some suggestions and points you have for them?

Nalleli Cobo [00:12:05]:

Something my mom always says that I think is very beautiful is that this movement is a puzzle piece. And every single person has their own unique size and shape and their own unique abilities. And without you, the puzzle is incomplete. And it's finding your strengths, it's finding your passion and running with it, because everything ultimately goes back to fighting for our earth. And we need sustainable designers. We need people upcycling and designs. We need people talking about ocean acidification and sea level rise. And we need people talking about animal agriculture and finding your passion with it and defending it.

Nalleli Cobo [00:12:40]:

And no activism for one person is alike. There's no one steady step, one step, two for activism. Activism looks different for every single individual. For me, it's heavily based on storytelling, like, I believe storytelling is a very compelling form of activism that goes unnoticed. I'm using my story to tell others about the environmental racism issue that we have in California and in the United States, about the urban oil extraction crisis, about the fossil fuel crisis, about the health crisis that we have and finding your peace, your passion, that whatever ignites that little fire in your belly and running with it and finding a way to defend the earth with that work.

Tania Anders [00:13:21]:

Yeah. Well, your mom is a very wise woman. I'm sure she has really, truly shaped who you are. You're very, very lucky to have her. I love that with the puzzle pieces, it goes back to this. It takes a village, right? We all contributed a piece to the puzzle, and hopefully together then we have a beautiful picture. Right? And as we are in earth week right now, of course, we are all concerned about the health of our planet, or we all should be, I guess. And so I really appreciate you sharing that.

Tania Anders [00:13:50]:

And hopefully, I know when you give your presentation to our campus that you will inspire a lot of folks. And for those who can't join the event in person, I really wanted to make sure that I capture your voice here for our podcast. So, before we close out our conversation, is there anything else you would like to share with our listeners?

Nalleli Cobo [00:14:10]:

Yes. So, SB 1137 is a very big fight that we are working on this upcoming year. So, two years ago, our governor and California governor, Gavin Newsom, signed and implemented into law a 3200 foot health and safety buffer zone between new oil extraction and sensitive land, which is historic. Unfortunately, the very week it was signed into law, big oil spent $20 million on a referendum. It is now being voted on this November. And the oil industry is willing to spend $200 million on this campaign. And that's our fight. It's an all hands on deck fight.

Nalleli Cobo [00:14:47]:

We need people voting to keep the law. We need people educating each other on voting for the law and voter turnout. It's a very big fight that we have ahead of us, but we're working together to defend our health and our safety for the state of California, because oil wells do not belong in our backyards or in our future or in our democracy, period.

Tania Anders [00:15:09]:

Well said. It has been such an honor to speak with you, and I wish you all the very best, and thank you again. I just can't thank you enough for your time and wishing you all the very best.

Nalleli Cobo [00:15:23]:

Thank you so much.

Kevin Truong [00:15:27]:

We hope you enjoyed today's edition of the Mount Sac podcast. Check back for other episodes to hear the incredible stories, happenings, and experiences we have in store for you on the Mount Sac podcast.

Tania Anders [00:15:38]:

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