

NEWS



## Joel Iboa: The solution to pollution in Eugene

Carl Segerstrom — November 21, 2016 at 6:00 am

Sometimes it's overwhelming. You find yourself turning off the air conditioner when you're behind a diesel truck or worrying about the Windex being sprayed on a table at a restaurant. The more you know about toxins that surround you, the more there is to worry about, but this knowledge can be a catalyst for action and change.

University of Oregon graduate Joel Iboa understands how a toxic environment can affect people and he is taking the necessary steps to protect the people of Oregon. At age 25, Iboa is the youngest member of Governor Kate Brown's statewide environmental justice task force by more than 20 years.

"In the last two years, I went from playing video games at 12 o'clock at night [to] sitting on the Governor's environmental justice task force," Iboa said. "That's a big responsibility."

Iboa went to UO interested in criminal justice reform and advocacy but left with a passion for environmental justice. Iboa described this shift as a change from focusing on crimes committed by individuals to crimes committed by corporations.

Now, merely two years after graduating, Iboa returns to campus to give lectures on environmental justice in West Eugene.

The concept of environmental justice, which Iboa described to a class of UO freshman Chemistry students, is based on seeking justice for low-income and minority communities that historically have been disproportionately impacted by environmental pollution. Bill Clinton codified Environmental Justice into law by Executive Order 12898 in 1994.

Iboa, a large man with a gentle handshake and laid-back demeanor, is the Environmental Justice and Community Outreach Manager for Beyond Toxics — a statewide advocacy group that tracks pollution and educates communities about environmental health issues.

Beyond Toxics is "not your typical conservation group that cares about wolves or National Parks or something like that," Iboa said. "Our concern is primarily with people and their exposure and vulnerability to chemicals."

Locally, Iboa focuses on environmental justice concerns in the Bethel and Trainsong neighborhoods of West Eugene.

"For me, it's deeply personal," Iboa said, "I have two cousins right now who have homes in Trainsong with little kids."

Iboa's work involves meeting with community members to understand the problems they face, doing educational outreach in schools and trying to organize and empower the citizens of West Eugene.

In stark contrast to the infrastructure that provides access to fresh food, transportation and medical services in most of Eugene, West Eugene has only three supermarkets, no primary care hospitals and essentially all of the heavy industry in the city.

According to the city of Eugene's [website](#), the disproportionate exposure to pollution and lack of access to health promoting services has led the city to recognize there are environmental justice problems in West Eugene.

Iboa and Beyond Toxics organize to promote awareness of pollution threats to families in the Bethel School District. The district is separated from the larger 4-J school district by the industrial corridor of the city. According to urban planning work group Envision Eugene's 2014 Environmental Justice Issue Briefing, the 97402 zip code, where the Bethel school district is located, has the most diverse and low-income populations and is home to all but one of the 31 industries monitored for toxic emissions in Eugene.

The negative effects of pollution in West Eugene are exemplified in the Bethel School District, according to a 2012 study produced for the EPA by Beyond Toxics and the Centro Latino Americano. Students in the Bethel school district had reported an asthma rate of 14.5 percent while students in the 4-J district only reported 8.08 percent of students having asthma — below the national average of 10 percent.

While the cumulative impacts on the families in the West Eugene community are clear, it is no easy task to mitigate the pollution they are exposed to.

The Lane Regional Air Protection Agency, which is responsible for monitoring pollution in Lane County, issues permits to industries that allow them to pollute at certain levels.

But Iboa sees this as a problem. "They monitor individual businesses," he said, "but they don't do enough to mitigate cumulative impacts."

The concentration of polluting industries and lack of access to services that promote healthy living is especially burdensome because of the political and socio-economic conditions that prevent residents of West Eugene from lobbying for change with the local government.

"Politically, they're disenfranchised," Iboa says. "The Bethel community is eight square miles and the biggest neighborhood in Eugene — last time I went to one of their meetings, maybe three or four people showed up. They're a really big community and no one is engaged."

Members of the West Eugene community, which is about one-third Latino according to school enrollment figures, face obstacles such as working multiple jobs, immigration status and language barriers.

"Unfortunately the things people experience in different parts of our city are different," Iboa said. "Once you cross Chambers Road, it's a whole other ball game ... so much of the built environment has such an impact on our life."

Iboa was raised in the Whiteaker neighborhood, across Chambers Road from West Eugene, and attended Sheldon High School. He graduated from UO in 2014 as a sociology major and served as the External Director of the Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan and Co-Director of the Center Against Environmental Racism during his time at UO.

Iboa has taken his education and student group involvement and parlayed it into a career of advocacy work that serves the community.

The lobbying efforts of Iboa and Beyond Toxics have contributed to the City of Eugene recognizing and addressing environmental justice issues in West Eugene.

"We put [environmental Justice] on the map," Iboa said. "Now if you go to the city council meetings, they will say without a doubt that West Eugene is an environmental justice community."

Acknowledgement of environmental justice issues by city authorities has created space for Iboa and the city government to work on solutions to improve the city for the future.

Currently, Beyond Toxics is working with Envision Eugene to create living-wages and lasting jobs in Northwest Eugene, specifically in the Clear Lake Overlay Zone, rather than add additional heavy industry.

Iboa said sometimes it's depressing trying to figure out solutions with industries that can be unwilling to cooperate and don't want their businesses to suffer from additional regulations.

Iboa is hopeful that his hard work on the Clear Lake Overlay Zone will pay off.

"If this passes, it will be the first of its kind in Oregon. This could be a model for the rest of the state."

The gains in recognition of environmental justice and potential for concrete action on the Clear Lake Overlay Zone are examples of the gains Iboa and Beyond Toxics have made in West Eugene; however, the need to keep working on behalf of the community persists for Iboa who said the scope and persistence of the challenges facing West Eugene residents can be disheartening.

"If you are taking a deep breath and it's killing you, then something is wrong."

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