

TEJAS: Environmental Justice Texas Style

A conversation with Juan Parras and Natalie Garza



JUAN PARRAS, executive director of Texas Environmental Justice Advocacy Services (TEJAS), was born in Big Spring, Texas, in 1949. Following his high school graduation from St. Anthony's Seminary in San Antonio, he took courses both at St. Mary's University and the University of Houston. Juan Parras dedicated his professional life to fighting injustices, first with Harris County social services, then with AFSCME, a national public services employee union. He later used his unionizing skills to provide organizational support for the community of Convent, Louisiana, in their fight for environmental justice. Eventually, Green Peace hired Parras, a move which he believes was the organization's first permanent Latino appointment in the nation. He worked with them on the "Toxic Campaign" against polyvinyl chloride (PVC) before budget constraints ended his job. From there, he did community outreach work for the Texas Southern University – Environmental Law and Justice Center, which led to the founding of TEJAS. Parras, who resides in Segundo Barrio, sat down with UH-Oral History of Houston director, Natalie Garza, in August 2009 to talk about his work.



In August 2012, and then again in September, the TPC Group petrochemical plant in southeast Houston released a burn-off flare in response to power outages. The thick black smoke blowing over Chávez High School spread for miles and is an indication that the flare was not burning "clean."

All photos courtesy of TEJAS.



The car crusher is one of the stops on the toxic tour at the corner of Navigation and Harrisburg. In a classic tale illustrating the “law of unintended consequences,” President Barack Obama’s Cash for Clunkers program unleashed an environmental nightmare through shredding, not recycling, many of the 690,000 cars people traded in for credit toward a new car. E–The Environmental Magazine claims recycling parts would have saved tens of millions of barrels of oil.

Natalie Garza: How did you get involved in environmental justice?

Juan Parras: One thing that I learned [from my Boy Scout leader, Bird Andrews] ... sort of lead me into environmental work. ... I remember going camping. ... If we went to a state park, or even a national park, we would camp out two or three days, and before we left ... he would line us up in a single file. He said, “Spread your arms and everybody just line up,” and he would make us walk all the way through our camping area and beyond the camping area and clean up everything. He says, “If it doesn’t belong in the dirt, pick it up.”... We would say, “Yeah, but, you know, this was filthy when we got here and now you’re making us clean up.” But, he said, “Well, you enjoyed it and if we clean it up, others can enjoy it.” ...

To me it’s important that all communities in a sense be treated equally. ... If I take you to some of those [poor] neighborhoods, again they all pay taxes, they’re all entitled to good city cleanup services. But, if you see the neighborhoods, they’re not getting it ... Why is it that poor communities have all the waste water treatment plants? Why is it that they get all the chemical plants? Why is that they get things, as they say, we don’t want those things in our backyard. The conclusion [in a recent] study was that those businesses come to low-income communities, African American, Latino, and poor whites because they don’t have the political resistance ... they don’t have the political connections. That’s one thing. And the other thing is they don’t have the resources. Because if you want to fight an environmental issue, you’re going to have to

“We’re not against jobs. But, wouldn’t you rather have a company that comes in here and you get hired, but it doesn’t have an impact on you? It doesn’t pollute you, it doesn’t cause cancer in the community, no birth defects, tumors. That’s what we want. We want a clean environment.”

– Juan Parras

a federal program to clean up uncontrolled hazardous waste sites.]

Four of us started it. I was working at the law school at the Environmental Justice Center, and ... TSU had an environmental justice clinic, and what we did is we provided legal assistance, technical assistance, and education. ... We had been thinking about starting our own nonprofit ... [because] if you’re going beyond what [the university] sees as trouble for them getting money from foundations or corporations, they’ll say, “Hey, you need to back off of this case ... or you can do this, but don’t do that.” ...

retain an attorney that deals with environmental issues, and it’s going to take a lot of money. ...

A lot of people that I take on toxic tours, they think, “Man, this is like a third world country.” “Yeah, it’s because you live in a third world neighborhood.”... I can take you right now and show you all the nasty things in our community like that scrapping yard there. They won’t build that in River Oaks, or they won’t build that in, the Medical Center. They won’t even build it downtown. But they’ll put it in our backyard. ... We have eighteen-wheelers left and right, I mean when I talk to groups in better off communities I tell them, “If you go into my neighborhood, an eighteen-wheeler is like a family car, because at a stop light you’ll see fifteen eighteen-wheelers ...” That creates a lot of pollution, and of course, we have the Houston Ship Channel ...

NG: Can you tell me the name of your organization?

JP: Ours is TEJAS; it stands for Texas Environmental Justice Advocacy Services. We want to deal with statewide issues, communities of color, in Mission, Texas, as well as Odessa, Texas, and Lubbock, Texas, and East and West

Texas. It has more of a universal tone than just simply one location. Some folks initially wanted to call it, “Houston Environmental Justice Center.” Then, if you’re outside of Houston that means that we couldn’t help you out. ...

NG: What are the goals of the organization?

JP: The goals are to fight environmental justice issues. The way to do that is to do it through education, through workshops, through training, to teaching people who to call in case there’s an accident or who to contact if they have a certain environmental issue because in the greater Houston area, all the way from here to Texas City, then Galveston Bay, we have a lot of water quality issues. ... There’s some that are dealing with land contamination, the Superfund sites, but our focus right now is on the environmental justice communities all around the Houston Ship Channel. It’s a big mission. [Superfund is



Members of TEJAS protest Valero and the Keystone XL pipeline as part of the Tar Sands Blockade, a broader coalition of Texas and Oklahoma residents using nonviolent direct action to physically stop the building of the pipeline. The Valero refinery, nestled against the Manchester neighborhood, is one of the destinations for the tar sands pipeline. Among other issues, protesters object to the potential for dangerous leaks and intimidation of residents to sign contractual agreements for their land. Visit www.tarsandsblockade.org for more information.

[It began with] my son, Bryan Lucas, or Lucas, and then my wife Anna, and then I have a real good friend named, Krish Navini (she's from India), ... John Sullivan, and we had another young lady, Pakistani, that helped us iron this out, do the nonprofit application, and we finally got nonprofit status in 2006. Once we got the status, then we got this building, and the way we financed this building was that each of us contributed to pay for the rent. We split it up, and so we maintained this building until we got a little grant for \$20,000, and we used most of that money for rent, because everybody is practically volunteers here.

NG: What activities has TEJAS been involved in since then?

JP: There're a lot of activities. [Educating the public in programs on KPFT, local PBS, the *Texas Observer*, CNN, the Center for Health and Environmental Justice has featured us on their national magazine two or three times.] ... I have served on the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council, which is a federally appointed position to be an advisor to the EPA, and then, I'm on several boards, national boards, Alliance for Healthy Homes, they deal with childhood lead poisoning. ... The Gulf Restoration Network ... deal[s] with coastal issues, erosion, wetlands, over-fishing, the oil rigs, the wetlands. ... About ten of us were invited to a personal meeting with [EPA administrator] Lisa Jackson, and I think that says a lot for our organization because in a very little time [2006-2009] we've made an impression or we've at least been noticed to where now we've been invited to the table. If you're not at the table, you're not making decisions and you're not influencing anyone.

NG: What kind of projects did you work on in Houston while at TSU?

JP: The first project that we started was the César Chávez High School. It is a quarter of a mile from an Exxon [plant that] is no longer there. We still have Texas Petrochemical and we still have Goodyear Tire and Rubber. Those three major facilities are within a quarter of a mile from the school. ... That area right there, Milby, the Chávez School, the Manchester community, numerous studies have shown

that out of twelve what they call hazardous air pollutants, they found eight are cancer-causing, and they're daily being exposed to those eight cancer-causing chemicals. ... We did not want the school to be built there because we know that over time, people are going to be having cancer and birth defects, and leukemia.

But, the school district, they claimed they made an air sampling study, and that we didn't have anything to worry about. Then we complained to the city because initially the city said, "Well, what do we have to do with that? We're not building the school and, and those are not our industries." We said, "But, you do have something to do with it ... You can deny permits for health and safety reasons." We complained against the school, the city, and the county, and everybody we could. But, in the end, they went ahead and built the Chávez High School. ...

As a Latino community ... we didn't have the political clout, but we went to our politicians for help. We went to Leonel Castillo and we said, "Leonel, help us. You know we can't have this school here," and we talked to him about all the environmental issues ... [He] basically told us, "Well look, there's so many environmental issues in that area that I'm going to recommend to the school district that they make this an environmental magnet school." Like a slap in the face. Because of all the issues, he should say, "We need to move this school, but being concerned about the environment, maybe we ought to have an environmental magnet school, but certainly not here." ... It was upon his recommendations that they made it an environmental magnet school ... [At least three other state and city elected officials] stated that there were no environmental problems that we should be concerned about at that location. ... We found a lot of documentation to show that it's not a safe school, and it's still not a safe school. The people that could have helped us did not help us. ... All three Latino groups [National La Raza Council, United Farm Workers, and MALDEF] basically told me the same thing, "We have other priorities when it comes to environmental stuff. We have teenage pregnancy, we have high Latino drop-outs, we have immigration issues, we have separation of families. The environment we care about, but we don't have anybody to help you with that." That's why the environmental justice is defined as we don't have the political clout or the political connection. Everything passed and they built the school.

NG: I read a 2007 *Texas Observer* article about you and Chávez High School, and it said that the city health department was going door to door to document the prevalence of cancer.

JP: There is a study that's being done. ... But they haven't been successful because they've been going into the houses, and one of the criteria they develop[ed] for themselves is, first of all, *mira*, cigarettes have benzene ... once you find a smoker, they're not eligible. That household doesn't qualify for the study ... [because] if you smoke, you're going to find it. ... Too many studies show that we have a serious problem there. We actually don't need any more studies ... There's money in research versus money in actually solving the problem. ... Communities are always saying, "Look, you are always studying us, but you're never helping us" because studies [don't] ... come up with real solutions. Real solutions

would be to ... relocate people, move them out. But then, they say, "Who pays for the relocation?" Well, the polluters. We are known in our state for having the least fines on industry than any other state. We do basically a slap on the hand. ...

NG: Where is Manchester?

JP: If you go straight down Harrisburg, the next community is Manchester. It's adjacent to Magnolia ... It's bordered by the Houston Ship Channel to the north and then, it's bordered by Valero to the east and then, it's bordered by railroad tracks, train yards, *y luego* there's one or two entrances into that community. It's literally a hub surrounded by chemical plants and train yards and everything that again, nobody wants it. And it's the worst community in the city [for pollution] in addition to the Deer Park area. ...

NG: What do you think the solutions would be at this point?

JP: [It] depends on views, right? Because the Environmental Protection Agency [says], "If we get them to reduce their emissions of toxic chemicals into the air, won't that make the [Chávez] school a safe place?" I told them, "Yes, as far as exposure, yes, but what, what about the case of an explosion? You're too close."... [If there] could be an explosion, I'd rather that school be shut down, and relocate the students.

...

[In 1996, the EPA asked for a study of the "worst case scenario," which the industries renamed a "risk management plan."] If there's an explosion here [the plant], the end point is like nothing happened. You didn't even know an explosion happened because the chemicals and the impact of that explosion didn't get to this point. But, then they have ... the "near point." The near point again, is injury, bodily harm, or death. The school is in the near point of those three facilities. ...

Anybody with sense would say, "Well, why do I want to put three thousand kids so close to harm's way, when I could put them at the end point or the far point?" But the school district says, "Well, that's the only place we could find this amount of land ... I say the community needs to wake up and just demand that they get another school. ... [In response to politicians who do not want to tell the public



Manchester Terminal is located at the intersection of the Houston Ship Channel and Sims Bayou, just east of the East 610 Loop, covering 72.4 acres. In the background is a fire at the Lyondell-Citgo refinery, May 17, 2010.

Photo by Bryan Parras.

that they wasted \$100 million to build the school, Parras asks,] "What are you going to tell them if two or three kids, or more, die because of us building a school there?"

NG: Why do you think environmental issues are so low on people's radar?

JP: When it comes to Latinos it ranks pretty high. The environment, they care deeply about it. ... Our politicians say, "Hey, there's nothing wrong here. I grew up here, and besides you live in Houston, it's the industrial capital of the nation; this is what you have to live with because this is who we are. Houston is a big shot in industry." [Latinos] need to be more active ... anyone who cares about the environment, they ought to be supportive of groups like us, and others that are trying to change the environmental situation. We're nonprofit and I'm telling you, we are working with nickels and dimes. ... I have a lot of college students that come in here, they volunteer, in kind and then I have a lot of other groups that say, "Well, you guys are doing a good work and keep it up," but no finances, and that's what it takes. That's what I'm telling you about environmental justice ... poor people can't give you the money to help them out.

NG: Are the people you take on toxic tours from this neighborhood?

JP: No, they're mostly a lot of outsiders, college students at Rice, UH, Houston Community College. We have people that come in from Bhopal, India, China, California, because once you start connecting with other environmental



Bryan Parras, the son of Juan Parras and Media/Youth Coordinator of TEJAS, gives a speech at the Environmental Grantmakers Association, sharing his experiences with this international organization that networks environmental funders working to achieve healthy, equitable, and sustainable ecosystems, communities, and economies.

groups ... they'll call you up ... They say, "Hey, Juan, we're coming through Houston. Can you show us the East End, and can you tell us issues that we can take on to Atlanta, or take on to New York, or DC?" That's how you are able to network. [At one point a group of about 500 people from major cities traveling to the US Social Forum stopped in Houston.] ... We were able to invite the mayor [Bill White] to the Manchester community because the mayor also had a study done on the levels of toxins in the air, and Mayor White has been very active in trying to reduce the level of pollution. ... He wants to reduce levels of benzene. ... He [said], "Everybody's entitled to clean air," and that's a human right. ...

Sometimes you can smell a chemical like natural gas you know, they put an odorizer so you can smell when it leaks, but otherwise if you didn't have that ... you wouldn't smell that gas and it would kill you. That's the thing with air pollution and chemicals being released from the companies. Here you have ... benzene molecules in the air, you don't say, "Hey, there's benzene," ... but you're breathing all these chemicals and they get thrown into your system and some of them cause cancer.

NG: What do you think you did to get TEJAS noticed?

JP: One is that Anderson Cooper did a good story when they did *The Planet in Peril*. That featured the Manchester community and the high rates of leukemia with the people that we have been working with. ... The Center for Health and Environmental Justice posted the César Chávez School in their front page. ... That gave us national attention. And

then being on this national board [that advises the EPA,] it gives us an upper hand too, to deal with people that we can get more exposure. And, we have a good board, a good volunteer board like Krish Navini, she was the international organizer for the Bhopal incident. That was the accident at Dow Chemical and Union Carbide had in India. It killed about 25,000 people just overnight because of the plant leaking. She brings an international presence. We have an attorney, Martina Cartwright that works at TSU. She's an environmental lawyer. ... Maria Jimenez, she's on our board and she's known for all her immigration activities. She's still an adjunct professor at UH. ...

NG: How many people do you have on the staff?

JP: If you're thinking staff like paid people, we don't have anyone. I'm the executive director; we have my son, Bryan Lucas, who does all the videos, documentaries for us. He's done a lot on Katrina y Hurricane Ike, y Rita ... Right after Hurricane Ike, they were not allowing people in there [Galveston], *pero* he was able to get in there because we work closely with University of Texas Medical Branch, UTMB, and so they had badges to get into the hospital, so we were able to get in with them to do some filming about the destruction. [The Katrina documentary] actually was sent to nearly 2,500 doctors throughout the nation. ...

We also did a film here called *Wishing You Were Here, in the East End*. We actually had kids, high school kids that went out there and filmed it themselves. They did the interviews ... It's been on PBS. ... Basically it's going into the community and interviewing, "Okay, how long have you lived here? What are your concerns, and have you seen any action done?" And most of them will tell you, "No. It's like nobody cares about us." And we want that on film so that we can convince foundations that look, this community needs help, or these individuals need help. ...

We've been struggling on very little money for the last three years. The other thing that kept us afloat *es que* we all had individual jobs and this was like a side job where we come in here and just bust our tails off trying to do something. But everybody sort of has a full-time job ... I'm trying to raise money to pay myself at least, to continue doing this kind of work and keep this place open. ♻️

Toxic black smoke from a TPC plant flare fills the sky over people playing on the athletic fields of Chávez High School. Although the plant entered into an agreement with the City of Houston to reduce harmful emissions, a report filed with the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) for the September 2012 incident indicates the release of butadiene, a known carcinogen.

