

“FIGHTING FOR ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE”

A STUDENT PROFILE OF ANDRE RIVERA

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Interviews conducted by Alex Kudryavtsev on June 11 and August 11, 2010

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Andre Rivera is a high school student and youth organizer in an after-school environmental education program at Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice. He works with other youth and his educators to green the community through fostering civic engagement, campaigning for new parks, redeveloping brownfields and cleaning up the Bronx River. In this narrative story Andre recounts his experiences as a student and youth organizer in YMPJ.

My name is Andre Christopher Rivera. I am 17 years old, and I go to Lehman High School. Both of my parents are Puerto Rican; one is raised in Manhattan and another is raised in the Bronx. I have one sister, two nephews and a niece. I was born in Manhattan at Metropolitan Hospital, but I grew up in the Bronx. I moved into this neighborhood about seven years ago, and I live in an apartment. My neighborhood is surrounded by three major highways. The quality of air in this area is terrible because of all the highways and truck traffic. A couple semesters ago I got hired at Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice (YMPJ) as a youth organizer. Basically what I do here is work on rain gardens, rain barrels, maintaining the green roof and work on the Bronx River canoe program. I also do tree stewardship with other students around the block. As a youth organizer, I work along with other students in YMPJ where I develop my leadership skills.

When you think about the Bronx, everybody thinks how it is all negative, with crime and pollution. This is true for some parts. We do have some crime and a lot of pollution. But I see the Bronx as my home because I live here. I grew up here, so anything that happens in the Bronx, especially the South Bronx, is very important to me. It became



important because of the work I do in YMPJ. For example, a couple weeks ago there was an oil spill in the Bronx River – that’s very important because it impacts the quality of water, the quality of life of the Bronx River. But before I came to YMPJ I did not know anything about the river. I did not know anything about parks. All I knew about the environment was trees and photosynthesis. But now I see that trees help to clean and beautify the environment. I began to learn about this over time.

I would describe the Bronx as multicultural and diverse. Multicultural – because we have different people from different backgrounds and income levels in the Bronx. The South Bronx is the community that has the poorest congressional representation, the highest asthma rates, the highest poverty rates, the highest dropout rates and some of the highest crime rates. But that does not mean we are a bad part of the city. It’s just that we have the misfortunes of being the poorest congressional district. But on the good side of it we have a whole bunch of youth organizers and community leaders who are trying to improve the community. Success stories include creating new parks like the Concrete Plant Park, Hunts Point Riverside Park and the soon-to-be Starlight Park. The Bronx River here enters the poorest part of borough, which is probably not very fair, but we have to work on it. We deal with our responsibility as the community not to let it sit there and do something for it.

I came to YMPJ around 2003–2004, and I’ve been here for several years off and on. In the past, I would just go straight home after school, sleep and watch TV. I was not as social because I didn’t have to be. During summers I would just go out to the Crotona Park pool or Orchard Beach. The only reason I came to YMPJ was that in school my teachers told me that I need to find something to keep me busy and become more social with people, “You have to do an after-school program.” And my mother found this program on my block. When I first came in 2003–2004, I did not know much about the program just like anybody. It was just a random program that I walked to every day.

When I first started, I was skeptical about it, “Should I do it? Should I not?” When I first came in, I met the staff and went through orientation about how the program is going to run through the day. We had some homework help if we needed. Maybe one of my most memorable moments with YMPJ was the first time I got onto the river and boated down the river in a canoe. You go from the North Bronx and you come down. In the beginning you can see the water, you can see the little fishes, and then you are coming to the South Bronx, “Wait, where are the fishes?” What you see is a floating rat, and you see floating trash. I think that in public schools we need a lot more education on such environmental issues. In school we are constantly studying, “Oh, a plant has this cell, and the animal has this cell.” We are not talking about all the issues in our community, how our areas are extremely polluted, or how we can’t have access to the river because there is so much industry on our riverbanks. In schools we don’t even learn about pollution, we don’t learn about other stuff that YMPJ teaches.

Each group of youth in after-school programs in YMPJ has a project in the community, and you work to improve that project over time. Sometimes this means going to do rallies, doing community gardening, some kind of civil service for a community. When I first started, I participated in the asthma campaign, which is about all the pollution

because we have 17% rate of asthma, and that's due to the three major highways – Sheridan, Cross Bronx and Bruckner. The dust pollutes the air and goes to people's apartments. So I started off working on asthma campaign to educate the community.

Soon after, I ended up working with an environmental educator Steve Oliveira. He introduced me to the whole idea of canoeing, gardening and doing fish quality studies in the Bronx River. He educated me about how to catch fish and what types of fish there were, what types of trees there were, how to plant a tree, how to plant native species, how to identify them and how to pull up weeds. We had about 10 to 15 students in the environmental group that started off with Steve. During the summer we would work about 25 hours a week, and then during the school about an hour and a half four days a week.

I have been with YMPJ for about 6 years, but have been a youth organizer for the last two years. Youth organizers help to train new members. During school year we get maybe 5 to 10 students in the environmental program each semester. But during the summer we have many students coming here through the summer youth employment program. We give them orientation, we tell them about different environmental and social campaigns, like the combined sewage overflows. We teach them about the steps to do it, different organizing skills and different gardening skills. As a youth organizer I get to go out to the community and work with the trainees on how to use what we've learned during our campaign sessions. For example, we talk about the history and ecology of the Bronx River while canoeing.

Overall in YMPJ, you get a lot of different experiences depending on what you want to do. Just because I work in the environmental team does not mean that I don't have other experiences with other groups in YMPJ. I can work with the environmental team, but we all collaborate on larger social injustice issues, including environmental injustices, educational injustice, cops beating up people, and immigration issues. I focus on the environment, but environmental students in YMPJ still work with other students as a whole to support one larger project, which is to restore our community and bring it where it should be. I think that every person that comes to this organization has their own unique way of doing things. As a youth organizer I think I'm a reliable person. You can tell me, "Andre, I want you to meet with you at this time, or I want you to come to help me out." I'm going to come regardless if I have time or not, I make space to represent the organization. I have not gotten tired of doing that, although I've been with YMPJ for several years.

We are trying to educate our community that the Bronx River is an important resource. You can't see the river in the community unless you cross over a bridge, and the community does not have access to it unless you walk along the side of the highway. People can't access the river because the highway blocks the access. You can't use the river right here, for example, to fish. The first time I went fishing to test toxicity in the water we started fishing near the bridge in our community, but the hoods and lures got stuck to the bottom maybe because of trash. We could not pull the rod. So we left that place to go to another park called Bronx River Park. My first time going there I threw the

rod, and the guy in the park said, “This is how you tie the lure.” I guess I made some mistakes because there was a catfish on the end of it, and I let it go. When I pull up the rod, he is like, “No, don’t pull it up.” Fish went. So then I threw it back in and I caught a catfish for the first time ever. I never saw a catfish in my life, I never thought there would be a catfish in the Bronx River. We caught eels, a crab and some fishes. When we came back to the organization we basically wrapped them up in plastic, froze them, and sent samples to a lab in Virginia, and they tested them for the toxins.

The results for the toxin tests say that you can eat only one fish a month to stay safe because of toxins. You can eat only one fish no matter how much you catch. But unfortunately fishermen catch striped bass and bluefish in the Bronx River in Concrete Plant Park, and sell them for like \$20. But the quality of that fish is not good. These people say that they have been fishing all their lives, they have been eating this fish, and nothing happens to them. At the same time, plant life and animal life is dying in the river because of pollution from combined sewer overflows.

To prevent rainwater from going into sewer contributing to sewer overflows, we built the green roof on the St Joan of Arc Church, which is next to our office. Basically it’s a rooftop garden. Instead of regular soil you have specially engineered soil, it’s lightweight so it won’t take down the roof. It takes up one half of the roof. It collects water instead of it going to sewer, it uses the sunlight. In summertime when they have masses in church you don’t feel the heat under the green roof. And in wintertime the roof keeps the church warm. It also holds native species that are native to this community. I was not here when the roof was established, but I participate in its maintenance – pulling up weeds, watering, planting some rosemary, onions and sunflowers. I’ve seen people who have been amazed by seeing a garden on the roof. They are like, “What is the garden doing on the roof?” In addition, we collect water on our roof to get water for our garden. People have been amazed by seeing the pipes going from the roof to rain barrels in the garden, “Why is this water goes in, why you just don’t water it?” I say, “Instead of just wasting water every day and spraying it with water hose you can just have it off the roof when it rains and put it through the garden.”

I actually helped Julien Terrell, the Director of Organizing at YMPJ, to teach students from Phipps CDC and the Point CDC about our rain barrel system and the green roof because we are working with them on a demonstration project for the community, a project that promotes rooftop rainwater harvesting. We came up with this project because the research shows that if you reduce the amount of rain that goes into the sewer, the pollution of the river will reduce. So we collect the water that comes from our roof in a rain barrel and use it to water our plants. But before that we had to look at our gardens, mix the soil with sand and compost, which is actually coming from worm poop and elephant poop from the Bronx Zoo, and mix that with mulch. Then we hooked up plastic tubes from the roof to a barrel, and then a hose goes under the garden. After we implemented the rain barrel system we never had floods in the basement of the office.

The education is not only for our own community. For example, last summer one of the main things we were doing was working on a service day with the Bronx River Community Houses, which is a housing development authority

across the street. They had 200 kids from all over the city coming to this community, and planting trees and shrubs. And we had even a group of high school students from the North Carolina countryside helping us plant a couple of flowers and native species in the community near the senior houses. Many of them said, “Oh my god, I can’t believe all the pollution that we see, all the noise.” They told us that it’s a lot different in North Carolina, they don’t have buses like we do, the air quality there is a lot different, there is no that much noise, there are more plants and trees. These students were mostly Caucasian kids, and in this neighborhood you find mostly Latin American and African American people. They were helping us, that’s what counts, no matter what color you are. As long as you are doing something to help your environment, you are doing good job.

We are living in the South Bronx – the poorest congressional district in the whole United States. We are the last of the last people to get any funding for anything. I noticed it when I did the first Bronx River Flotilla with YMPJ. We would go up to 218th street. We went canoeing down the Bronx River from the cleanest part of the river to the dirtiest. It’s like two and a half hour ride. You would see the cleanest part of the river, see the river shining, you pass the Bronx Zoo, see the buffalos and stuff. You have to pick the canoes and carry them over the dams and the waterfalls. And then we hit this part of the river where all we’ve seen was tires and car parts. It displayed how the community is organized. You go up north, and the community is extremely clean, but when you go down south, it’s where the pollution and trash in the water. It’s also the problem of ownership of the community. If the politicians and the government who are in charge of the community don’t want to keep it clean, then it’s your responsibility to do it. YMPJ shows a way to do it and get people to do it. Youth learn that you are stewards, and you should be able to treat the community as it would be your house or your own family.

Once in a while we have community forums to discuss this. We talk about issues in the community and sometimes the fathers and the mothers come and talk about their issues with us. And when we have the youth summits and national social forums, we meet people who have been pioneers in organizations, done the environmental work, and set standards for us. For example, the last United States Social Forum was in Detroit, Michigan. I went there with five other youth organizers and two adults from YMPJ. We were going to join other groups around the nation to do the work that we do, to meet and network with other organizations, and to conduct a workshop on education justice.

When we went to Detroit, we were driving down blocks of abandoned broken buildings. We passed five blocks with nobody, and they were broken up. Buildings were abandoned, broken glass, fields that had nothing but dirt. The only places that were good – it was the convention center and baseball field. They had a food market that was almost as big as in Hunts Point in the Bronx. The South Bronx may still be poor, but Detroit was poor by definition. Their problems and their community problems got worse compared to other communities.

Being in Detroit for a week, you understand how different it is compared to the Bronx. It made me appreciate my home a lot better than I did. You go there, and you say, “Oh, look, I come from the South Bronx, the poorest district in the United States. And we have these polluted rivers. But you go over there, and it’s abandoned.” You can’t find

people walking down the block, if you do – it's like maybe one person per hour. And most people who live there are homeless. I've seen a homeless guy on the street, there was a homeless guy who was actually sleeping next to our bus stop. Everybody kept on stepping over him to get on the bus. Their buses were broken down, very old, had no air conditioning. I think it's good to go in a different community and compare it to your own community. Now I better see the issues that we still have to fight in my community.

Maybe one of the most successful issues that YMPJ campaigned for was Concrete Plant Park, which opened last fall. We had the opportunity to celebrate the opening with a whole bunch of organizations and the Park's Commissioner Adrian Benepé. We had Adam Green from Rocking the Boat, Adam Liebowitz from the Point CDC come and talk about their work. We had our display board representing our past and present work that we've done in Concrete Plant Park. It used to be a cement plant. After it was closed they were going to put a truck route through. But YMPJ along with Parks Department wanted to keep that space and create a park. It took about 11 years to have it open, and now it serves as a riverfront park. It has the stairs to go down to the river, so you can go and canoe from that park, or bike through the park from Westchester Avenue to the Hunts Point community in five minutes.

Another trip outside of the Bronx was to Freedom Farm, which is upstate. Freedom Farm was created by YMPJ alumni to serve the community, grow fresh organic food, and help out people who need help. The people who are in charge of Freedom Farm were youth organizers with YMPJ when the organization was created. Instead of going to McDonald's, you make something that's organic. We made pancakes of whole wheat and farm milk. Nothing was pasteurized, nothing with pesticides or chemically changed. This summer we took summer youth employment students to Freedom Farm. Their first impression was like, "Oh god, this food is nasty, of my god, these bugs are all over me." They are not used to having bugs on them, they are not used to grass, they are not used to trees that are truly green. So they were like, "All these bugs are bothering me." Students were scared of cows, they would scream when the fly would come close. I was like, "Hey, this is the same fly that's in the Bronx, the same fly that's in your community, but maybe it's just upstate and is a lot bigger and healthier." When you step out of your own comfort zone and go to Freedom Farm you think it's awkward and weird, and kind of crazy. But then you understand that living in the Bronx is unhealthy, and we need to work on issues.

Another memorable experience in YMPJ was building a raft representing the Bronx River watershed. Alex Levi from SLO Architecture came with his wife to YMPJ and did a presentation of the project, which we liked and then worked on it. We made this raft in the basement of the St Joan of Arc church. We basically took recycled stuff such as bottles, umbrellas, Metro Cards – and we built a raft of it, a big floating raft that looked like the model of the Bronx River watershed. We took umbrellas and created hills that the community has. We created the train stations. We took bottles and put steel wires through them to create the greenway. We took markers and colored in colors of the Bronx River. We took little square pipes and made them the sewage outflow pipes. We took three branches and glued them together to make the forest parts of the city. We took Metro Cards to make them like trees and the community map.

We worked on this raft for two or three months. Towards the ending we had to put different sectors of the raft together and put everything on top of empty bottles. When we put it on the river it floated perfectly fine. We had it float in the Bronx River by Concrete Plant Park last fall when it first opened. The big challenge with that was that we could not find anywhere to put it to store and preserve. So we took it to the recycling plant on the Bronx River in Hunts Point and recycled it. The raft was tied to canoes, and we floated it to the recycling plant. The recycling plant is on the riverfront. Barges and tugboats are coming to pick up trash. And that day there was a big tugboat coming and we almost got smashed in canoes. They stopped in the last minute and we saw this big arm that came off a construction vehicle, and it threw the whole raft on top of the barge. All this work that we did for a couple of months was gone in a couple of seconds.

I think the best way to teach students in the community about the environment is to do it physically. Don't put them into seats and talk them about facts because it's boring. Instead of lecturing you can actually show them in person, which is more fun. You have to find an activity that interests them and shows them the difference. Take them out of the city, go upstate to a farm, eat organic food, then compare it to a supermarket food. Taste that, taste this, which one tastes better. Of course you are going to say that food from the supermarket you are used to tastes better. But you have to be able to show them the dynamic of being a youth in the South Bronx, and present the dynamic of being a youth outside the South Bronx. And of course I often notice a difference between students in YMPJ and the outside community. I think they are accustomed to what we call "wasting" and we are accustomed to recycling and reusing. As a youth organizer I have to understand, "Okay, you come from a different background." Most of my schoolmates don't work in environmental organizations, and don't really care. Some people in the community say, "I don't care," but some people say, "Let me join that program."

I'm going to senior year in high school. In the future I want to focus on political science – doing the organizing work I do in YMPJ, but on a higher level as a politician. I'd like to tell people what is wrong in the community and what needs to be fixed. I'd like to be a leader, not a follower. I want to do environmental science too. I still want to do the work I do here, but on a higher level and in a more educated way. I would like to get a public office to educate and influence a whole bunch of people, maybe to be a Parks Commissioner, maybe a councilman, I'm not sure yet. So in a couple of years I'm going to college to study the community and the environment. And then I'll probably come right back to this community.

I don't want to go to college too far, probably I'll go upstate. I still want to be home at the same time. I want to experience different communities, see how they work with environmental stuff. But at the same time I want to be here too. I don't want to be one of those kids who grows up, becomes a leader of their organizations and does not bring it back to the community. I get a lot from the community, and I give a lot to the community. I want to be able to give and still take at the same time, but do it fairly and properly. For instance, Jennifer Lopez – she grew up in the

South Bronx, and now she is a big hip-hop star. She lives somewhere in Hollywood, and from what I know she does not give enough back to the community or we just don't hear about that.

I want to be one of those who takes from the community and brings something back. From this community I get experiences and first-hand stories about how people have grown up here, and how they've seen the community change because of the work that we do as environmental activists, youth organizers and coordinators. After college I want to be able to come back to the community, ask them what they want, be able to give them what they want, and be able to teach kids and the community about environmental justice.