

Saúl Cuevas-Landeros

Program Outreach and Volunteer Coordinator

YES Nature to Neighborhoods

Interviewed by Jonathan Zhang

Edited for length and clarity

My name is Saúl Cuevas-Landeros and I am a young Mexican man born and raised in Oakland, California. I'm a lifelong learner who likes to get outdoors primarily through hiking, backpacking, and running but I've loved playing basketball growing up and rugby in college. My recent hobbies have included birding, reading, and playing video games. My guiding dream at the moment is to complete the Pacific Crest Trail before I'm 30!

Could you share a little about yourself and what YES Nature to Neighborhoods does?

I was born and raised in Oakland, went to high school in Alameda, and then to Maine for Bowdoin College. I came back 3 years ago and was lucky enough to come across YES Nature to Neighborhoods. As the Program Outreach and Volunteer Coordinator, my time is spent on volunteer training, systems management, and program outreach. In other words, I show up at different community events, talk about the organization's programs, and recruit new participants primarily from Richmond and West Contra Costa. YES Nature to Neighborhoods started in 1999, and we've expanded a lot since then. We offer programs for youth, adults, and families to experience nature, get to know what summer camps are like, and focus on personal and leadership development goals. We do this through field trips and nature-based activities. Our hope is that participants become more involved in their community, whether that looks like volunteer work, joining a board at another organization.

As the Program Outreach and Volunteer Coordinator at YES Nature to Neighborhoods, what keeps you motivated to continue to expand YES' community involvement?

What brought me to the organization was the opportunity to be immersed in nature. I love the outdoors and the activities it offers, like backpacking and hiking. I joined YES to make many of my personal hobbies more accessible to people in the community. Increasing representation in the outdoors is something we try to do: to help others see themselves belonging in nature. That's what it boils down to for me.

Do you speak another language? How did you learn the language?

My family's Mexican, so I grew up speaking Spanish pretty regularly. It wasn't until preschool or kindergarten that I transitioned more towards Spanglish while learning English. That's still present; I still speak a lot of Spanish and Spanglish. You don't put much thought into it until you're older.

What languages does YES support for their programs and why?

We primarily work in English and Spanish as it fits the current demographic population of Richmond and West Contra Costa. Richmond specifically is about 40% Latinx. That's the main reason our program has Spanish. When I send an email, it's usually translated, because I'm able to respond in Spanish. Let's say YES has a trip coming up this summer and I'm reaching out to volunteers with an update. I would send that in Spanish and English. A lot of our in-person speaking events, or even the family camps I mentioned, are all bilingual. More recently our larger events have switched to using translators. They will come with hearing devices for those who need translation. The translator speaks into the microphone, and it goes directly to the people who have the hearing devices. YES currently only provides services in English and Spanish, which still leaves out a large population. From the standpoint of representation, our organization is trying to build up representation of people of color in the outdoors. I hope that expands in the future both the languages we provide our programs in and the people we serve.

How many people rely on the bilingual nature of YES? How does incorporating bilingualism help you better serve the community?

There's a quote from Nelson Mandela, "If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his own language, that goes to his heart". I really do feel that when I am speaking Spanish, or English, or even just a lick of another language, I feel that joy of sharing my culture. It does make a difference to the participants; it makes them feel valued, very valued. When I work with kids specifically, it is very much more inclusive to them because a lot of kids are English language learners. When we're in those elementary and middle school settings and we're able to speak directly to the youth in their language, it makes a big difference. They definitely feel more comfortable, more able to participate, and cared for.

We serve around 500 people across our programs and cohorts. I think everyone who knows Spanish, and even those who don't know the language, benefits from the bilingual aspect of YES. Having English and Spanish opens up cross-cultural exchanges. For instance, the other day I was talking to my coworker, and we were talking about ham and how one of the kids was referring to ham in Spanish, calling it "jámon". My co-worker knew what that meant, but he thought it was just a pork type of ham. But in Spanish, we just use jámon very generally, it's all kinds of deli meat. You then have to specify the type of ham if you want to get specific, but when you're speaking English, you're probably referring to just pork.

Do YES mentors receive language training such as learning professional jargon or interpretation skills as part of their job training?

We don't have any particular mandate to learn a language. But, we do have a professional development stipend. The stipend can be used to help pay for language lessons. Mostly, our staff's language abilities are screened during the interview. Not that it's a make or break, we do have staff who don't speak Spanish, but it can be very helpful for the people we work with as I mentioned before.