



Episode 7: Fighting For Safe Outdoor Play in Little Village

Nine year-old Rosalia Gonzalez and her teammates love playing flag football through Beyond the Ball Girls, a Little Village organization that teaches children life skills through sports. Safe outdoor recreation is especially important to the families in Little Village, a predominantly Latino neighborhood in Chicago impacted by higher rates of gun violence and gang activity compared to much of the city. Little Village also faces high rates of environmental pollution as a result of a coal plant and Target distribution center in the area. In this episode, reporter Gina Castro investigates the intertwined issues facing the neighborhood, and meets the Little Village residents, activists, and community leaders working to make their neighborhood a safer place for children to play outdoors.

Gina Castro: By 2050, Latinos will make up [a quarter of all women in the US](#). We're gaining an education, participating in the labor market, accumulating wealth, and embracing entrepreneurship.

I'm Gina Castro, an investigative reporter based in Chicago. I report on social justice issues in communities of color. This episode takes us to the southwest side of the city in Little Village, fondly known as the Mexico of the Midwest.

[sound of kids playing outside]

Rosalia Gonzalez started playing flag football this summer just a couple of blocks away from her home.

Rosalia Gonzalez: I like how we could run and I'm able to throw the football. I never actually really play with the football. I play with a basketball or soccer ball. But my cousins do soccer, basketball, and baseball. And so I'm trying out a new sport for my family.

Gina Castro: Rosalia is nine years old. Her family has lived in Chicago's Little Village for three generations. Her grandparents moved here from Mexico. She has a one-year-old brother and 17 cousins, a fact she's really excited to share.

Rosalia Gonzalez: I feel comfortable playing with older girls because I have a lot of older cousins, so I'm used to playing with older cousins and, I mean, older people.

[sound of kids playing outside]

Gina Castro: It's a sunny Tuesday afternoon in August. Rosalia's short, wavy, brown hair is tied in a ponytail. She's smaller and younger than the other girls on the field. Rosalia and her teammates gather up for a scrimmage. They're wearing blue and orange

Chicago Bears jerseys. Rosalia's team is playing defense and she's the rusher. The second the opposing team snaps the football to the quarterback, Rosalia sprints across the field to rip off a flag from the quarterback's waist. Running fast and ripping flags are Rosalia's two favorite parts of flag football.

Rosalia Gonzalez: And I run really fast but it's hard because they do sharp turns and I don't like to do sharp turns because one time I did a sharp turn and I fell over.

Coach: Defense! Nice game, nice game!

Gina Castro: After the game, the girls huddle up and take turns complimenting each other on how they played.

Coach: Ready? One, two, three, BTB Girls!

Gina Castro: This game and many others like it, is part of how [Beyond The Ball Girls, or BTB Girls](#), acts on its mission. BTB Girls is a free program in Little Village that teaches girls in first to eighth grade how to play sports.

Playing sports in elementary school and through adolescence has a lasting impact on children's health and education. Children who play sports are [eight times more likely](#) to exercise as adults than children who don't play sports. It also lowers rates of anxiety, depression, and substance abuse among youth. Student athletes even reach higher levels of education. High school athletes are more likely to graduate from four-year colleges than non-athletes.

Unfortunately, not all children in Chicago or the US have an equal opportunity to learn and play sports. Low-income, Black, and Latino children are [less likely to participate in organized sports](#) than their affluent white peers. This is partly because of the cost of sports. According to the National Park and Recreation Association, [92% of parks and recreation agencies](#) in the US charge fees for all youth sports. On top of the racial and wealth gap in sports, there's [a gender gap](#) that is only compounded for girls of color. Latina girls have [the lowest athletic participation in the US](#), according to the LA84 Foundation, a youth sports organization based in Los Angeles.

Angie Dominguez: We decided that it would be nice to bring it back and just have the girls have a safe space where they could be themselves and they won't have to worry about labels or what the boys think.

Gina Castro: That's Angie Dominguez, a senior coach at BTB Girls. She's explaining that the BTB Girls took a break during the pandemic, but resumed activities in the summer of 2022.

Angie is 21, energetic and warm. Connecting with the girls comes easy for her. She has straight, dark brown hair, hazel eyes, and an electronic whistle that she

loves to let rip on the field. She wears a gold necklace with a pendant of the Virgin Mary.

(in tape) I love your necklace. Where'd you get it?

Angie Dominguez: Oh, it was my grandma's. So she gave it to me when she passed away, so she gave it to me and I have worn it ever since.

Gina Castro: (in tape) Yeah, it's beautiful.

Angie Dominguez: Thank you so much.

Gina Castro: Angie says she didn't have many opportunities to join sports teams when she was growing up. She found out about Beyond The Ball her first year of high school.

Angie Dominguez: So I found out a little bit late, but I wish I would've found out when I was little bit younger.

Gina Castro: Team sports seemed to be something only boys got to enjoy. Angie says BTB Girls is changing that narrative.

Angie Dominguez: Girls are good at sports too, so that's something that was missing in Little Village because boys would always be like, "Oh, girls don't know how to play." And here it's like no, girls could be as good as boys are. So I feel like that's what's missing in Little Village.

Gina Castro: Stereotypes about girls not belonging in sports can keep them on the sidelines. [But research shows](#) that Latina girls are subjected to messaging from coaches, schools, and friends that they specifically don't belong in school-based sports.

A study published in the Journal of Adolescent Research [looked closely at this phenomenon among Latina girls in Arizona](#). The majority of the girls in the study were of Mexican background between 12 and 15 years old. Their coaches were also included. Researchers found that both the girls and their coaches believe that boys are naturally better at sports and that girls are more emotional and fragile. The study also showed that the Latinas found it difficult to see a future in sports because the boy teams received more school funding and fans. The Latinas in the study and the majority of the coaches agreed that Latinas prioritize family and academic obligations over sports.

Angie says in her community, it can still be difficult for parents to encourage their daughters to play sports.

Angie Dominguez: Especially moms that are Latinas, Hispanic, they have that little stereotype of girl... they could get hurt easily or they're a little bit more sensitive, or, "Oh, you're a girl. You don't play sports." So I think for a lot of moms, it's really

terrifying or a little bit difficult for them to accept the fact that girls do play sports, girls do like basketball, girls do love volleyball, girls do like to play soccer.

Gina Castro: One of the activities Coach Angie tasked the BTB Girls with was to teach the group about their favorite female athlete. In 2021, [just 7.5% of professional athletes](#) identified as Latino.

Anaid Ortega: Megan Rapinoe, I like how she plays middle and tries to score and give good passes to her teammates. That is why I like her.

Gina Castro: That's Anaid Ortega. She's Rosalia's nine-year-old godsister. Soccer is her absolute favorite sport. Megan Rapinoe plays on the US Soccer team. Anaid woke up at 3:00 AM one morning just to watch Rapinoe play in the 2023 Women's World Cup.

Itzuri Nicasio Medina says her favorite athletes are her coaches at BTB Girls. They're all Latinas who live in Little Village and have their own expertise with sports.

Itzuri Nicasio Medina: I think that they know how to connect with the girls and people in general when they're talking with them and they're very social, the coaches, they communicate well with the kids and each other.

Gina Castro: Itzuri's mom, Laura Medina, loves that Itzuri and her brother are part of the program. She says sports help them de-stress and it's a great reason for them all to get some fresh air. Laura also appreciates that Beyond The Ball is free. In Michoacan, Mexico, where Laura is from, she didn't have opportunities to learn sports like at Beyond The Ball.

Laura Medina: En realidad es bien. Pero no hay como todas las oportunidades que tienen los niños aquí. Porque aquí los entrenan. Entonces aquí les enseñan paso a paso de cada deporte que hacer o no hacer las reglas y ella pues en realidad no están... no es como jugar y ya. No es tanto como seguir reglas de cada juego pero es bueno. si las hay pero cuesta dinero tener un deporte y que te lo enseñan a como es entonces en las escuelas solo lo básico no es tan como que las reglas exactamente de todos los deportes.

[audio of Itzuri and friends playing in the living room]

Gina Castro: On a chilly night in October, Itzuri turned 12 years old at home with her family. Her cousins and best friend are playing Don't Let The Balloon Touch The Ground while her younger brother plays with his toys on the living room floor. Itzuri is laying out each of her new K-pop albums on the bottom bunk in her bedroom. Her cousin, Fatima, scrolls on her phone on the corner of her bed.

Itzuri Nicasio Medina: I'm not really hoping for anything because I think I really have everything that makes me happy. I'm okay with everything that I have. I think just to hang out with my friends and family more.

Barbra Medina: Each of Itzuri's cousins said they hoped in the next year of life, Itzuri will make more friends.

Orali Medina: I just want her to grow more... how she is. Not mature, just her to just grow mentally and... yeah.

[sound of the family celebrating]

Gina Castro: Orali, Itzuri's older sister, didn't want Itzuri to see her birthday cake a moment too soon. Black icing frames a photo of her favorite K-pop star on the cake. The traditional Mexican birthday song, Las Mananitas, plays as Itzuri walks, eyes covered, to the kitchen table.

[audio of the family singing "Happy Birthday" to Itzuri]

Gina Castro: Orali snapped a photo of Itzuri with her Polaroid camera, just moments before some real birthday chaos unfolded.

Orali: Okay. She's going to push you.

Uriel: Orali, I was gonna do it.

Orali: Okay, give me a smile.

Uriel: I wanted to do it.

Gina Castro: Uriel, Itzuri's 6-year-old brother hooks his arm around Itzuri's neck to try to push her face into the cake. She doesn't move an inch, but Orali though manages to smush Itzuri's face into the corner of the cake.

[sound of the kids singing]

Gina Castro: Itzuri's dad, Fernando Nicasio says he hopes Itzuri continues her studies and has a bright future too like Orali who started college this year.

Fernando Nicasio: Ah igual. Estudiar... estudiar que quiera hacer algo en su vida como, como tú. Como tú tienes algo, en tu futuro.

Gina Castro: Orali hopes Itzuri just continues on whatever path she's on.

Orali: I don't know, I just hope she just keeps being her. Yeah.

Gina Castro: A total of 40 girls signed up for BTB Girls this summer. It's about the same number of girls as pre-pandemic. BTB Girls isn't a strict commitment. The girls aren't on any specific teams and there aren't game days per se. Instead, the girls are split into two groups, the younger girls and the older girls. For an hour or two days a week, the girls meet and play the sport they voted on. The younger girls chose to learn track and volleyball. The older girls picked volleyball and basketball. Each week the BTB Girls focus on a different value.

Angie Dominguez: So for the first week, we had them talk about trust and somebody they trust and what they think about trust and everything. The second week, we talked about nonviolence and how they should feel safe in the community and how if they have anything they want to talk about that they should always come to us. And then for right action, it's about being patient with themselves, learning how to love themselves. So I feel like they use that.

Gina Castro: Part of the mission of Beyond The Ball is to teach young athletes personal responsibility through sport, like finding ways to encourage youth to make good choices as an individual by doing their homework and chores. Beyond The Ball takes it a step further by also teaching social responsibility, emphasizing the power each young person has to make positive changes in their community.

In Angie's case, coaching the girls at BTB inspired her to pursue a degree in psychology with a minor in child development. She plans to be a school psychologist.

Angie Dominguez: So my goal is to get a degree and come to a neighborhood and just offer my service for a cheaper price or even do it for free if I could.

Gina Castro: Angie talks a lot about healing her community. Her younger brother, Raul also volunteers at BTB teaching boys soccer and softball. She says growing up, they didn't get to play outside much unless they were at school.

Angie Dominguez: So the funny thing, my mom was very much like... she didn't want us to go out because the neighborhood that we lived in was a little bit dangerous. We would usually just go out after school and play after, and then she would pick us up around an hour later.

Gina Castro: Angie's mother was likely responding to her perception of Chicago's crime rates at the time. In 2016, Chicago's second deadliest year since the year 2000, there were [769](#) homicides. Angie was 14 years old at the time. Chicago's homicide rate dropped to [492](#) in 2019, but spiked again during the pandemic. 2021 was Chicago's deadliest year in the 21st century. There were [804 homicides](#).

Little Village is one of the 15 areas the City of Chicago identified as [most affected](#) by homicides and non-fatal shootings. Between January and October of 2023, Little Village had 63 fatal and non-fatal shootings. That's about six shootings a month and 12 of the victims were [under 19 years old](#). Across the US, Latino

youth are [three times more likely](#) than white youth to be killed by gun violence, including in Little Village.

[ABC News Clip:](#)

On a snowy afternoon, the Little Village community coming together in remembrance of Melissa Ortega. “We’re sad because we remember Melissa Ortega...”

Gina Castro:

That clip was from ABC-7. Last year, 8-year-old Melissa Ortega was shot and killed while walking with her mom on 26th Street. Melissa's family had immigrated from Mexico only six months before. [A 16-year-old was charged as an adult for her death.](#)

A five minute drive north of where she was killed, there's a 17 foot mural on Lawndale and Ogden Avenues. That's a memorial to [13-year-old Adam Toledo](#). A Chicago police officer [fatally shot](#) Adam after he dropped a gun and put his hands up. Names of other gun violence victims are on the mural too.

Little Village is a [majority Latino](#) and Spanish speaking neighborhood on the southwest side of Chicago. It's known throughout the Midwest and Chicago for [its bustling 26th Street](#). The two mile long street is Chicago's second highest tax revenue generating shopping district. The more than 500 majority Mexican owned businesses generate at least 900 million annually.

A terracotta archway with the words, "Bienvenidos a Little Village," adorns the street entrance. It was [a gift](#) from the Mexican government. By contrast, it's also home to Cook County Jail, one of the country's [largest](#) pre-detention centers. [Many](#) of the residents and families are working class people who immigrated from Mexico. Mexicans have been moving to the area to work in coal plants and on the railroad [since before World War II](#).

Many were pushed over to Little Village in the '60s and '70s when major newcomers like the University of Illinois contributed to an increase in the cost of living in Pilsen, a nearby historically Latino neighborhood. [At the time](#), Little Village was majority white and the white residents didn't react warmly to their new Latino neighbors or the growing Black population in the nearby North Lawndale.

In 2023, the area is still a blue collar community. The median household income in Little Village is [more than \\$27,000 less](#) than all of Chicago's. [About two out of every five](#) Little Village residents have less than a high school diploma. Enlace Chicago, a community organization based in Little Village also reports that [24%](#) of Little Village residents are not US citizens, with a large number being undocumented. It can be [a lengthy and expensive process](#) for undocumented residents to obtain work visas or apply for asylum. This combination of factors, low education levels, plus limited access to work visas for undocumented folks makes it difficult for Little Village residents [to get better paying jobs](#).

Compounding these socioeconomic factors are Latino gangs that [formed in the '70s](#) to fight white gangs and make money in the drug trade.

- Rob Castaneda: We're 50 years into this long history of gang activity within the community.
- Gina Castro: That's [Rob Castaneda](#), the co-founder and executive director of Beyond The Ball, the nonprofit organization that runs BTB Girls and other sports programs in Little Village.
- Rob Castaneda: In 50 years, you're talking about, grandma and grandpa could have been gang involved.
- Gina Castro: Locals like Rob often attribute [shootings](#) in the neighborhood to gangs. In the summer of 2023, a 15-year-old boy was [fatally shot](#) in the chest while walking on the sidewalk in Little Village. A white vehicle pulled up and sprayed bullets at him at 4:00 PM on a Sunday.
- Rob Castaneda: Just because you're from a neighborhood doesn't mean you can go anywhere in that neighborhood and feel comfortable.
- Gina Castro: Little Village has two prominent gangs that divide the neighborhood into the east and west sides. Beyond The Ball is based in the center, on a lot that Gary Elementary and Josefa Ortiz De Dominguez Elementary share.
- Angie Gonzalez: I think Lawndale has always been a dividing factor amongst... unfortunately the gangs here.
- Gina Castro: That's Rosalia's mom, Angie Gonzalez, who's picking her up after BTB Girls.
- Angie Gonzalez: At least in this area, we are fortunate enough that they don't come this way. They're not as active on this side of the streets, more so like the 27th, 25th, 26th area, and I think it has a lot to do with the fact that there's a school here. The law enforcement is a lot more active.
- Gina Castro: She walked a couple blocks from home and brought along Rosalia's baby brother and the family dog. Angie was born and raised in Little Village.
- Angie Gonzalez: In the past, we just had one elementary school. We used to have a pool here where right now it's a field. But it's good seeing how it's evolved to have different activities for the kids besides having our kids grow up in the same place as we grew up in.
- Gina Castro: (in tape) Yeah. When you were growing up, did you play outside much?
- Angie Gonzalez: We did. We didn't have as much sports within the school as they do now. We would go to different schools because obviously the area was a little bit different. The resources were different back then.

- Gina Castro: She says she played volleyball, basketball, soccer, and softball at Gary Elementary.
- Angie Gonzalez: It's changed a lot in the sense of, there's now actual sports. We didn't have outside sports. It was just whatever Gary Elementary School would offer. But it wasn't like any other resources beyond that. But now that the fact that... and I was actually just seeing that there's little kids that might be in a different school over there on that end, so the fact that people are taking their time to be here after hours with the youth, it speaks a lot about the area.
- Gina Castro: Yeah. Community leaders like Rob and the Chicago Teachers Union have fought hard to fund sports in the city's elementary and high schools. After the union's longest strike in 30 years, in 2019, it secured a contract that included [25 million in sports funding](#) along with other demands. The funding is divided equally among elementary and high schools and funds uniforms, sports equipment, and stipends for coaches. The five-year contract as of now ends in the fiscal year 2024.
- Rob's work does more than introduce youth to sports. It's reversing generations of trauma.
- Rob Castaneda: For us at Beyond The Ball, a big part of what we're doing is not just providing programs for young people, but also helping make the spaces that we're playing in safe. Because for decades they've been unsafe or not deemed as safe and not a place where parents want their children to play.
- Gina Castro: Public parks are an ideal place for gangs to operate. It's where they can avoid police and loitering laws. So for decades, gang members [laid claim to Piotrowski Park](#), the only park in the neighborhood until 2014. Piotrowski Park became known as unsafe for children and family to play, especially for those traveling from the opposing East Side gang territory.
- Currently, the majority of murders and shootings in Chicago happen in public spaces, like on the sidewalks and in alleys. These shootings [disproportionately impact communities of color](#) who are on the west and south sides of Chicago. African-Americans and Latinos make up 80% and 17% of all shooting victims, while just 2% of shooting victims in Chicago are white. The city attributes its violence to smaller gang groups, even though gang territories aren't as prominent as they were in previous decades.
- Rob says the decades of violence in Little Village and its continued presence weighs on the community.
- Rob Castaneda: When people are involved in that lifestyle, it can be very chaotic. It can be very stressful. It's a lot of trauma and of course, if you're 5 years old, 6 years old, 10 years old, and you're growing up around that, that's going to definitely impact you. You may not have been the intended target, but you were with a loved one,

a family member who maybe was an intended target, and that affects a lot of our kids.

Gina Castro: A study by Anne & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago showed that Chicago youth who experienced gun violence [reported feeling scared, anxious, and isolated](#). Studies have shown that this kind of chronic trauma can impact a young person's brain development and ability to concentrate.

Rob Castaneda: What the research shows is that when somebody is physically active for at least 15 minutes, their brain releases good chemicals that make people feel better right away, but then it also makes them more resilient to chronic stress and trauma. And so when we do this type of work, we do it to give young people something to do, but it's also like administering large doses of public therapy when we do this type of work.

Gina Castro: Beyond The Ball has consistently hosted play days on this dividing line between the gangs for 23 years. And research shows that this violence intervention strategy works. [A 2019 University of Illinois study](#) interviewed former gang members from 13 different gangs, including members from the two most prominent gangs in Little Village. The study shows that fun activities like sports, music and art, especially when provided for free, can deter youth from joining a gang and engaging in violent behavior. Breaking the cycle of violence can help ensure that public spaces are safer for future generations.

Rob Castaneda: Historically, when you think about communities where there's high rates of public violence, a lot of that violence takes place in public play spaces, and so public play spaces tend not to be utilized or they're underutilized, or they're not used at all.

Gina Castro: When Rob, a coach, and his wife Amy, a teacher, moved into Little Village in 1998, they noticed right away that there weren't many places children could play outside aside from Chicago Public Schools' programming. It's what both Angies experienced across two generations, the coach and Rosalia's mom.

Rob Castaneda: So you don't see children playing, which makes it eerie. I think one of the interesting things, if you go to public play spaces in many portions of the south and west side of Chicago, you might have a lot of activity happening in controlled environments like inside of park fieldhouses or inside of schools or Boys and Girls Clubs, but you don't see kids playing outside.

Gina Castro: Rob grew up playing basketball in South Chicago, a neighborhood 20 minutes south of Little Village. He and Amy don't have biological children, but Rob says they have thousands of children they helped raise in the neighborhood.

On a warm humid afternoon in June, Rob is running a Beyond The Ball day. Colorful cones split up the large green field the two elementary schools share. Children of all ages are playing soccer, softball, and other sports in each section.

Their jerseys say Beyond The Ball on the front. Teenagers and young kids ride their bikes on the track that wraps around the field. Pop songs play from the Ortiz school building, and parents sit on cement ledges in the shades surrounding the track and field. There are stands nearby selling snacks in agua frescas.

Rob Castaneda: For decades, nobody ever used this space in an organized way to play. Like people might play informally. And you hear 30-year-olds, 40-year-olds tell me stories about when they used to play here as a kid and then the shootings would happen, and they'd hit the ground, and then people would leave, and they'd get back up and keep playing because that's what life was like for them growing up here.

Gina Castro: Rob estimated that about a thousand people were there, a typical crowd on Play days.

Rob Castaneda: And so now all of a sudden you have hundreds of people, and then sometimes thousands of people, coming out here in this space and using it in a structured, organized way on a consistent basis. And what that's done over time is it's changed people's perception of what it means to be in this space, what happens in this space, and that change in perceptions has led to a change in behavior and how people behave in this space, and what's acceptable and what's not acceptable.

Gina Castro: Beyond The Ball offers free programming throughout the year, but ramps it up in the summertime when kids are out of school. Students who don't have access to enriching summer activities can lose [up to three months of reading and math skills](#), according to Horizons National Chicago. Beyond The Ball is from five to eight in the evening, and once the sun goes down, Beyond The Ball rolls out an inflatable screen and projects movies. Rob says it's important that there be something for all ages to enjoy.

Rob Castaneda: What the research says is in order to make a public space feel safe, the number one thing you can do is put people in it and they have the most effectiveness. You want diversity in age and gender, so you have from young little kids, all the way up to elderly, and everything in between. That's how people feel the safest.

Gina Castro: Before the Covid-19 pandemic, more than 5,000 young people participated in Beyond The Ball programming each year. In 2023, Rob estimates they reached about 3,500. That's [about one in five](#) of the estimated 18,000 youth under the age of 19 in Little Village. Public violence isn't the only health issue making it hard to place safely outside in Latino communities like Little Village, the environment is another major factor. Chicago is [the 18th most polluted city](#) in the US. At one point in the summer of 2023, while kids like Rosalia and Itzuri played at Beyond The Ball events, Chicago had [the worst air quality in the world](#). Smoke from Canadian wildfires brought the city's air quality index to 175, which makes the air a health hazard for all people.

But on any given day, Little Village has among the worst air quality in the city according to data collected by the Microsoft Research Eclipse Project. The project dispersed 115 air quality sensors in Chicago. It found that Little Village and five other neighborhoods had [the highest air pollution in the city](#). One thing these neighborhoods all share aside from being majority communities of color, is that they're all located by industrial corridors in high traffic areas. Trucks coming in and out of the industrial corridors release high levels of pollution called [particulate matter 2.5](#). These particles are 36 times smaller than a grain of sand. If they're inhaled, it can decrease lung function, worsen asthma, and cause premature death to people with heart or lung disease.

Children are among the most vulnerable to health effects from particle pollution exposure. [The two main hotspots](#) for particulate matter pollution in Little Village are 26th Street by Central Park and California Avenues and the intersection of California and Cermak. Both locations are about two miles away from the field that BTB Girls play at, and about a mile from La Villita Park, the second park in Little Village. Each day [more than 700 trucks](#) barrel through Little Village, and that's just coming from the Target distribution center. [Hundreds more trucks](#) from metal and plastic container manufacturers, warehouses, and trucking facilities come down 26th Street daily.

So much so, residents in Little Village are [working on a class action lawsuit](#) against the City of Chicago, demanding that these trucks be banned from 26th Street. Much of the truck traffic is generated by companies in the industrial corridor, a mile from Lawndale High School, Zapata Academy, and the Gary, Ortiz Elementary Schools, where Beyond The Ball is based.

Pollution surrounding Little Village schools isn't new. In 1994, parents at Gary Elementary [began complaining](#) that their children were suffering asthma attacks, fainting and having high blood pressure from the renovations at the public school. The school was refurbishing windows and re-tarring the roof.

Jose Miguel
Acosta Cordova:

And a lot of the students in the school were getting nauseous, were just getting sick in general, were getting headaches. So the parents organized to stop CPS from re-tarring the roof during school hours and were successful.

Gina Castro:

[Jose Miguel Acosta Cordova](#) is the senior transportation policy analyst at [Little Village Environmental Justice Organization and Advocacy Group](#). He's also a Little Village native. After winning their fight to prioritize their children's health at Gary Elementary, the parents went on to found the nonprofit and continue to address environmental justice issues in the neighborhood.

Acosta Cordova:

I think that's what's important for parents to know exactly what their children and what themselves are being exposed to every day. Because it has short-term and long-term impacts that I think sometimes we don't always make the connection with.

Gina Castro:

Latino youth in Chicago suffer from asthma at [higher rates than white youth](#). Between 2016 and 2021 in Chicago, Latino children under the age of four-years-old accounted for 27% of the 7,114 children who visited the emergency department for asthma. About 23% were white children. And for the children between 5 to 19-years-old, 23% of the 16,436 children were Latino and 16% were white.

An asthma diagnosis [often prevents](#) Chicago youth from going to parks and exercising. A study of Chicago parents who have children with asthma shows that they avoid common asthma triggers like seasonal allergies and air pollution.

In other cities in the US, asthma rates are high for Latinos too. The Los Angeles County Public Health Department found Latino children have asthma related emergency room visits [at twice the rate](#) of white children. In Houston, a 2016 study of a predominantly Latino area that borders industrial facilities found that they suffered from [higher rates of cancer and asthma](#) than people in wider communities farther from industry.

For people dealing with chronic health issues like asthma, that can mean paying to see a doctor more often and taking more time off work. [Almost 23%](#) of people in Little Village are uninsured, more than double the rate of the city overall. Illinois does offer children healthcare through the [All Kids Healthcare program](#). The cost of an asthma inhaler can run [up to \\$400](#) when paid out of pocket, and that's a high price for a community with a per capita income of \$15,855, where [28% of residents](#) live below the poverty level.

Chicago's asthma rate for children is 16% according to 2020 data. That's higher than the rate for Illinois and the US. Communities on the west and south sides where more black and Latino people live, report [higher rates of asthma](#). The Little Village Environmental Justice Organization estimates 6.1% of adults in Little Village where four out of five residents are Latino have asthma.

Acosta Cordova:

So it's really important that people understand that if we want change, if we want real things to be different, and to not have an economy or a society that exploits people or kills people, kills our planet or literally polices people and kills people, I mean, we need to fight for those things ourselves. We can't rely on the political and economic leaders to do that for us.

Gina Castro:

Little Village Environmental Justice Organization has worked on many campaigns throughout its decades of activism, including a long battle to close two coal plants that had been in the area for almost a hundred years. [A 2000 Harvard study](#) found that collectively the coal plants caused 2,800 asthma attacks, 550 ER visits and 41 premature deaths each year in Little Village and neighboring Pilsen. The EPA shut down the plants in 2012.

Then in April 2020, the Crawford Coal Plant [demolished its smokestack](#).

Acosta Cordova: They actually did it by implosion, which is the fact that you're trying to implode this 88-year-old smokestack with all this dust inside was really just so irresponsible to begin with.

Gina Castro: According to Block Club Chicago, a local digital news outlet, and the Little Village Environmental Justice organization, residents were [barely given 24 hour notice](#).

Acosta Cordova: The dust from the smokestack just really engulfed the neighborhood and you see the smokestack get imploded and knocked down, and then just this huge pile of dust just really just goes throughout the neighborhood.

Gina Castro: The city gave the owners, Hilco Redevelopment Partners, approval for the demolition. It then [fined them \\$68,000](#) for the botched implosion and Hilco paid \$370,000 [in a settlement](#) with the Illinois Attorney General's Office over alleged environmental regulation violations.

Hilco built [a Target distribution center](#) in the former coal plant's plot. Hundreds of trucks come to and from the Target distribution center daily. These types of long haul trucks emit [a combination of chemicals and contaminants](#) that can cause asthma, premature death for people with heart or lung disease and heart attacks. A study from the American Lung Association found that if trucks and electricity went zero emission in Cook County, [nearly 38,000 asthma attacks and 1,300 deaths would be avoided](#). It also saved the public \$14.3 billion in health costs.

But sometimes the industries that pollute neighborhoods also employ residents. Manufacturing is [the top industry](#) in Little Village.

Acosta Cordova: We need those jobs to survive, we need those jobs to feed our families, to house our families, to everything. So it's really a really tough thing.

Gina Castro: Jose says he hopes the movement away from fossil fuel includes Little Village residents.

Acosta Cordova: How do we make sure that people who are employed in these industries aren't losing their jobs, and are finding opportunities in the new emerging industries as well?

Gina Castro: Through its efforts to fight industrial polluters, Little Village Environmental Justice Organization is also helping carve out more safe public spaces in the neighborhood. Little Village has 227 acres of vacant land. That's about 172 football fields. Residents have access to nearly [an acre less](#) park space than the typical Chicago resident.

For more than a decade, residents and activists in Little Village fought with the EPA and the City of Chicago over the pollution from an asphalt company, Celotex. In the '80s, residents reported [finding coal tar on their property](#) and

people living near the site reported [suffering from skin rashes](#).

Finally, in the early 2000s, it became [an EPA superfund site](#). A superfund site is a hazardous waste site the EPA has permission to clean up. The Celotex site was cleaned up and eventually, thanks in large part to [the advocacy of high schoolers in Little Village](#), the City agreed to purchase the site and develop La Villita Park.

It's the first park on the east side of Little Village and the first to be built in the neighborhood [in 65 years](#). It opened in 2014. Sapling trees lined the sidewalk, the Aztec paintings on the large skate parks still look fresh and vibrant. A chain link fence encloses the beginnings of the Little Village Farm, sponsored by Little Village Environmental Justice Organization. The farm plans to provide fresh fruits and vegetables for residents and teach them how to cultivate healthy food. Tomatoes and green apples are ripening in the garden. Soon the farm will have a chicken coop, goats and beehives.

Rob of Beyond The Ball, Jose of Little Village Environmental Justice Organization, and residents like Rosalia's mom and her coach Angie, are all working towards the same goal of making their historic neighborhood safe for future generations. For Rob, safety and security is the foundational building block to achieve this goal.

Rob Castaneda: Even though environment is important and we want to strive to live in... have the healthiest air and the cleanest community, it's like we don't have, I guess, the luxury to be like... that's our number one concern because we experienced so much public violence.

Gina Castro: Angie Gonzalez, Rosalia's mom, thinks crime and violence in Little Village is getting worse in 2023. So she focuses on what she can control, the safety of her immediate family.

(in tape) Where else do you feel comfortable letting your kids play outside?

Angie Gonzalez: Honestly, in the suburbs. On the weekends, we actually leave the city. We go west, so we go to the suburbs. It's a lot cleaner areas. The parks are nicer kept. There's bigger parks, less violence, honestly. So we go out to the suburbs to take the kids out.

Gina Castro: She too is planning to move to the suburbs for better schools. She's looking at [Woodridge](#). It's about 30 miles southwest of the city. Woodridge is quite different from Little Village. It's a majority white suburb where most residents are homeowners, speak English at home and have two cars parked in the driveway.

Little Village's majority Mexican population is also under threat from a different kind of migration. Gentrification is spreading like wildfire along the west side of Chicago in Little Village. In 2020, a developer took over a lucrative business plaza

in Little Village. [He's known](#) for buying up properties to turn them into Costcos and Targets. Among the lots purchased were the beloved Discount Mall, a taqueria, a Mexican bakery and a health clinic. The Discount Mall is known throughout the Midwest as a go-to spot for Mexican goods. But since Novak Construction bought the space, [67 vendors have been displaced](#).

Keeping Little Village's history of collective organizing alive is important to Rob. It's part of instilling social responsibility in the children who participate in Beyond The Ball.

Rob Castaneda: We also want them to understand what their role is in making our community a better place, and we want them to grow up loving their community. Not being like, "Oh, when I grow up, I need to get out of here. I need to escape this," but see themselves as not just their family's here, but their friends, their supportive connections, wanting them to be homeowners and to see our kids growing up and buying homes in the community and working, whether it's for Beyond The Ball or other community nonprofits or they're teachers and they're working in our local schools. We'd love to see that.

Gina Castro: Every summer, [La Villapalooza](#) takes over 26th and Central Park. It's a music festival that supports youth artists and musicians in the neighborhood. It's also a space to embrace and encourage diversity within the Mexican majority. Some artists played traditional regional Mexican music. Others added their own twist or broke from tradition entirely with Indie and Hard Rock.

Amber Fernandez, her husband and her two kids drove from the western suburbs to the festival. Deutzia is six and Pablo is four. They were out of breath from jumping in the bouncy house. Deutzia holds a stick of cotton candy tightly in her fist.

(in tape) What are you looking forward to doing the rest of the day?

Joyitzia: Painting my face.

Pablo: Trampoline!

Gina Castro: The family came to support the kids' aunt and uncle, who are running the face painting booth. Amber says the family makes the 40 minute drive from Addison to Little Village often.

Amber Fernandez: It's the culture, the environment of the people, the food, pretty much... hang out.

Gina Castro: Dancers with the [Ballet Folklorico Xochitl](#) grace the main stage with regional Mexican dances. Teenage girls swish their Jalisco ribbon dresses and boys in black bolero jackets and sombreros dance between them.

[audio of performance]

I asked Cindy Galindo, creative director of the dance studio, whose dad started it in 1995, what she thinks is so special about the Little Village community.

Cindy Galindo: I feel like we are a tight community. Everybody looks out for each other and everybody is always concerned about everybody's safety. So everybody, if they need a hand, businesses are always available to help out. So I like that everybody is... it's a friendly community. That's what I like about it.

Gina Castro: Ruby Chavez Abigail Simona is fresh off the stage from her performance. She has ice cream in one hand, her uncle Jose Chavez's hand in the other. She's seven years old.

(in tape) What do you like about Little Village?

Ruby: That my uncle lives there.

Jose: And the food.

Ruby: The food. I love the food and ice cream.

Gina Castro: Jose has a bouquet of yellow, pink, and white flowers for his niece.

(in tape) And what do you like about Little Village?

Jose: I like it because I like the Mexican culture. We've lived here for years, over 40 years. We live here. We have our roots here. I like the food, the people, and it's really exciting living here and it's changing every day. Every day is changing because of people. I see a lot of non-Mexicanos. I see a lot of Guatemaltecos. Like every other nationality, this is where the opportunity starts and that's where we started and started our roots.

Gina Castro: With the ongoing work of community organizations like Beyond The Ball and the Environmental Justice Organization and maybe a little bit of luck, Little Village will go on to be a place for immigrants and their children and their children's children to plant their roots for generations to come.

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