
Preface

The thermometer in my truck read 112 degrees in Delano, California, on the last day that I conducted fieldwork for this book. It felt appropriate—I had spent many sweltering days in the Central Valley. Besides, that day, just like my first one in the field for this project (and many others in between), I was hanging out with pesticide drift activist Teresa DeAnda.

DeAnda lives at the edge of Earlimart, a dusty and tiny farmworking community between Bakersfield and Fresno. She was catapulted into political activism when she and her neighbors were poisoned by an invisible cloud of toxic pesticides that drifted into their neighborhood from a nearby agricultural field in 1999. Because of her many family and work responsibilities, “interviewing” DeAnda typically means chatting with her relatives, riding in the car together while she runs errands, and meeting her neighbors, local officials, and other professional contacts. Persistent yet courteous, she is well respected by seemingly everyone, well connected, and one of the most prominent pesticide activists in the valley.

On this day, DeAnda introduced me to Luis Medellin, one of the youngest people I interviewed for this book. Somehow we had not formally met until that day, although I had seen him around at activist events in the past. We met at the coffee shop in the small town of Lindsay, where he was born and raised. Lindsay is a farmworking community just north of Earlimart, surrounded by orchards filled with oranges, olives, walnuts, pistachios, and stone fruit like peaches, nectarines, and plums. Luis is hefty guy, and he might be intimidating if it weren’t for his big smile and professional, positive, and friendly demeanor. His aunt, Irma Medellin, is an environmental justice activist, and he started joining her efforts eight years ago when he was sixteen years old. These days, he is busy managing an air monitoring and biomonitoring project in his town, where residents test their air and bodies for evidence of pesticide drift and exposure to it. After our interview, while he showed me a mural that he helped paint near



Credit: Illustration by Aaron Cole

the center of town, I asked how he stays motivated to devote so much of his personal time to his activist work. He mentioned that a friend of his from high school was diagnosed with leukemia in 2008, and died within a year after the cancer spread from his lymph nodes to his blood, stomach, and brain. Luis does not know whether that illness had any relation to pesticides, but he does know that his own body has been poisoned by pesticides and worries about the effects of those chemicals on his three younger sisters.

My meetings that day confirmed for me that the movement for environmental justice in the Central Valley is in good hands. DeAnda and

the Medellins, like so many of the activists I have met over the years, are thoughtful, creative, and optimistic. Their activist work involves educating their neighbors about environmental issues and policy processes, patiently building relationships with allies in local and state government, strategically choosing their battles, and cultivating the next generation of politically active residents. Like DeAnda, Luis Medellin is deeply committed to pesticide regulatory reform and has his heels dug in for the long haul:

We'll never give up. If someone tells you "no," you have got to go back, work on it, and come back until they tell you "yes." . . . If one door closes, another one opens. We have to keep on fighting. Even if it takes six hours, six days, six weeks, six months, six years, sixty years, we're still going to continue the work, no matter how long it takes to win a victory.

I feature the work of pesticide drift activists like DeAnda and the Medellins because I believe that they can inspire us, and also show us how to solve environmental problems more effectively and justly. It is worth pointing out that most pesticide drift activists do not refer to themselves as such, since pesticide drift is only one issue among many that they confront. Water pollution, other forms of air pollution, neighborhood improvements, and school funding are a few of the other main issues that many of them actively tackle. I focus in this book on pesticide drift because, in my view, it provides a compelling lens through which to understand and solve seemingly intractable environmental problems.

I should also warn the reader that I devote a considerable amount of this book to explaining the persistence of pesticide drift as a social problem. I do so because I argue that we cannot solve problems until we really understand where they come from. In particular, I concentrate my analysis on the institutional, cultural, economic, and other structural factors that render so many environmental problems difficult to understand and effectively address.

My overarching goal with this book is to demonstrate that environmental problems are as much about different ideas of what justice means as they are about technical issues or lapses in individual judgment. I want the reader to think about how social inequalities and relations of oppression complicate our abilities to understand and solve environmental problems—and how, in turn, we could use that knowledge to more meaningfully address environmental inequalities. Pesticide drift activists are everyday people who help show us how to do all of these things—how, in short, to pursue environmental justice.