



Image courtesy of Mark Stebnicki

ALHAN DIAZ-CORREA: FEEDING THOSE WHO FEED US

By Yan Lei

“Hi Folks!,” Alhan-Diaz Correa was first introduced to me through my Environmental Justice course as a guest speaker. Quickly, I noticed his love for calling people “folks”-- an endearing label that was the initial sign of his passion in inclusivity and community.

Alhan would’ve passed as a fellow student, his youth showing through a bright smile and a casual blue half-zip sweater. However, once he started talking about his experience in activism, environmentalism, and fighting against food insecurity, Alhan proved as professional, confident, and dedicated to improving quality of life.

Alhan grew up in Guadalupe, a city in Santa



*Alhan Diaz-Correa, Image
courtesy of Community
Environmental Council*

Barbara County that was so small that he had to be born in a neighboring city of Santa Maria. The child of undocumented immigrants from Mexico, Alhan was exposed to the agriculture business at a young age. His parents worked as farm workers for some time in Guadalupe, a common job due to Guadalupe's largest industry being agriculture. When reflecting back to his life growing up, Alhan states "I've always kind of had agriculture be my neighbor. For me, I never saw a distinction between Guadalupe and Santa Maria. I thought they were one big town. You know, you just go to one neighborhood and then the big farm in the middle. That's kind of how I grew up."

COOKING SOLIDARITY: A DIFFERENT TYPE OF ACTIVISM

In Guadalupe, Alhan pursued his passion of doing research as a Biochemistry major at the University of Montana (UM), over 1,300 miles away from home. During his time in college, Alhan learned how to be an activist as an unexpected result of trying to find a new crowd far from home. Guadalupe has a population that is 88% Hispanic, inevitably serving Alhan a culture shock when moving to the University of Montana's 78% White and only 5% Hispanic population. Being homesick while missing speaking and being surrounded by Spanish, Alhan felt as if he had lost his voice.

As an attempt to find a community in UM, Alhan joined the activism scene. Here, he rediscovered how to make himself heard by participating in protests that weren't just "conventional environmentalism", but rather focused on the impact of an issue onto everyday people. Alhan supported the extreme activist scene, which he described as "punk anarchist activists" by doing something less extreme— feeding them. Through the Seeds of



Activist Cooking, Image Courtesy of Seeds of Peace Collective

Peace Collective, he was able to contribute his part in furthering action without involving himself in dangerous situations. “I really appreciated that I could support such goal-oriented, direct-action-oriented work with food. You know, people need water. People need food.” Alhan describes his work, “We would get a grant to buy a variety of food, and cook for 50 to 300 people, basically supporting the ability for someone to go and march for 3 hours.” Through feeding people, Alhan found a way to stand behind radical activists in the frontline without sacrificing his personal capacity as a low-income student in an unfamiliar state.

A FRESH PERSPECTIVE RETURNING TO GUADALUPE

Alhan’s participation in activism at UM helped him understand that direct action can be supported in a variety of ways. After graduating, he chose to return back to Guadalupe, bringing his perspective into his new job at the Community Environmental Council (CEC). The CEC is a nonprofit organization based in Santa Barbara that fights against the climate crisis. Alhan committed his work into a different way of approaching environmental issues– listening and talking to those affected. Alhan wants his work to be personable, offering environmental education and conversations with community members, both in English and Spanish, in order to effectively organize around it. As a CEC member, Alhan noticed that there was a lack of activism not only in Guadalupe, but in all of North County Santa Barbara. This is dangerous due to the large industries of oil and agriculture that reside in North County, making these underrepresented communities vulnerable to public health issues. Due to his connection to his hometown and the lack of activism in North County Santa Barbara, Alhan has decided to commit his work to protecting this community.

Recognizing his privilege of having his job as an organizer and advocate under CEC, Alhan praises individuals that are able to take time out of their extremely busy lives to speak out. “Parents and students are good examples of groups that want to be involved, but are extremely busy. They are limited and their brains are filled with so much other information that is equally as important. Their voices can easily be ignored due to their other priorities.” He solidifies why we need to talk: to find out every person’s needs and work towards an all-embracing reform in the environment.



Alhan Distributing Masks to Farmworkers, Image Courtesy of Community Environmental Council

FEEDING NORTH COUNTY SANTA BARBARA WITH FRESA

After finding out my interest in interviewing him, Alhan invited me to join a FRESA meeting. FRESA, short for Food Resilience, Equity, Sustainability, & Action, is an advocacy group started in June 2020. FRESA works with nonprofits and food system advocates to promote accessible language, CalFresh, and food access to North County and Mid-County Santa Barbara. The word FRESA is Spanish for “strawberry”, a fruit that is largely produced and associated with California's farms. Through the screen of a zoom meeting, I could tell that Alhan was well-respected by community members. As the co-founder of FRESA, he facilitated the meeting and was a natural at keeping the outlook positive, a quality necessary when talking about food insecurity. In the meeting, a worker under the Santa Barbara County Department of Social Services brought up recent news that CalFresh’s additional benefits for the pandemic were ending. This was devastating, projecting that there will be a greater food demand during a time where food prices are also increasing. Alhan immediately countered the low spirits from the news by reminding the FRESA members of why their collaborative work was important. “The issue of food access and food insecurity is personal to a lot of us. And so, I think it is really important to share what we’re working on in these meetings because we are relying on each other to do this.” The sense of partnership was strong throughout the meeting, members of FRESA comfortably offering to share their services, talents, and equipment with anyone who needed it.



FRESA Advocates After Speaking at Presentation to Guadalupe City Council, Image Courtesy of FRESA



FRESA's Logo, Image Courtesy of FRESA

One of FRESA's main goals today is to gain authorization for CalFresh EBT to be used at farmers markets. In addition, these farmers markets would offer a Market Match benefit where EBT users can gain an additional \$1 to every dollar used, giving customers additional money to use. Another large objective of FRESA is to establish a farmers market in Guadalupe. Farmers markets and market match supports low-income households with EBT by getting more fresh food with their additional money. To help support local growers, FRESA ensures that they have customers, keeping a close loop food system in Santa Barbara County. Alhan and FRESA aim to have their farmer's markets accessible and welcoming, specifically to Spanish-speaking communities, by researching and implementing ways to create inclusiveness. Currently, FRESA is improving their outreach to others by inviting community members to meetings with Spanish interpreters, allowing all people to participate and be represented with the best accuracy. As a newer coalition, their social media and websites are on their way to be curated and updated with their research's survey results, bilingual posts, advertisements, and a "place to hold all of our successes", as Alhan says. FRESA has recently received a grant from the Fund for Santa Barbara and is excited to continue fighting for food security in North County.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FOOD ACCESS TO VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES

Food is a capital that has been taken away from farmers in North County Santa Barbara as the majority of their produce is exported. This causes a problem of food sovereignty in the economy, where the same farmers and laborers that grow produce are left with a lack of food access. By making farmers markets a safe space for all community members to buy fruits and vegetables from, we are guaranteed that families will eat healthier and eat more. As FRESA creates better affordability to local food, members of the community will be taken care of as they continue researching and interviewing local farmers and members of North County on how to best support them.

Alhan emphasizes the importance of food security in Santa Barbara. “We know that the county of Santa Barbara exports about 90% of its food and it imports about 90% of its food. So the county does not necessarily prioritize feeding the community as much as growing food and selling food, and then purchasing extra food to bring in. That's one of the ways that the system is purposefully not meeting the priorities of the community.” Everyone in the meeting agreed, *how can it be justified that the people residing in a county that is known for their agriculture industry be hungry? We have to feed those who work hard to feed us.*



"Santa Barbara County's No. 1 sweet crop: strawberries", Image Courtesy of Santa Maria Times

If you would like to support Alhan's work, FRESA and CEC are always looking for new help and conversations to have with any interested parties.

- FRESA is offering a fellowship for anyone bilingual in English and Spanish interested in continuing studies on food security in North County Santa Barbara. If interested, email FRESA at ncfresa@gmail.com.
- To attend monthly meetings with FRESA, email FRESA at ncfresa@gmail.com for the zoom link and meeting dates.
- The Community Environmental Council is looking to hire a full-time Climate Associate to join their team. If interested, visit <https://cecsb.org/>.

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