

Jessica Alvarez Parfrey: Building Bridges

by Olivia Terrazas

Jessica Alvarez Parfrey, or just Jess for short, is a 29 year old Isla Vista resident and alumna of the UCSB Environmental Studies program. As a true civic engager, she is the President of the Isla Vista Community Development Corporation, or IVCDC, and an avid activist in the Santa Barbara area. During her time as a student, she co-founded Eco Vista, a grassroots organization seeking to transform IV into a just and sustainable community for all residents. More recently, she disrupted the electoral race for 3rd District Supervisor by running against incumbent Joan Hartmann and challenger Bruce Porter.



Throughout her life, Jess always resisted positions of power. Rather, she thought of herself as a bridge to empower others. Though she was a natural-born leader, she felt it was her calling to encourage others to use their voices in an impactful way. Making activism accessible to those in the community who are usually excluded has always been her priority. This calling has inevitably thrust Jess into leadership roles, which she has used to foster grassroots movements and community engagement rooted in interpersonal relationships and a good time.

Roots and Early Growth

Jess was born into a mixed race family and grew up in San Diego with her parents, Antonio and Teresa, and her four siblings. From a young age, she was taught to be aware of the world and her place in it. “Mija,” her father would say, “The world has a certain set of expectations for you.” Though both of her parents encouraged Jess to embrace her cultural and ethnic background, they wanted her to understand the social and political implications of her identity as a Mexican, African, and Native American. “Do not let the world silence you,” her father said. “Be strong, and let your voice be heard.”

At the time, her father Antonio was attending UCSD, a testament to his ability to overcome what he had always been told was impossible. As a first generation college student, he was raised to believe that he was an anomaly in the system. Antonio was determined to beat the odds, and to make sure that his daughter felt empowered to do the same. So Jess went to class, participated in protests on campus, and came to learn how many things needed to be fixed in the world.

When it came to the environment, this was no exception. “My dad used nature as a framework for describing the world, problems and all,” Jess said. He surrounded her with animals, watched countless nature documentaries by her side, and took her to the beach frequently, her absolute favorite place. She developed an early fascination with the natural world, which, when coupled with her father’s passion for learning, led to a sense of curiosity and habitual questioning. He pushed Jess to cultivate a relationship with nature that did not give her power over it. Instead, she learned to see herself as part of a greater web within an ecosystem, and to recognize the connections that could be built between humans and the environment.

Jess nurtured this unique relationship throughout her childhood. When she felt isolated from the natural world, she sought out new points of connection within her community and beyond. “I became obsessed with the GreenPeace website,” said Jess. “And I knew that I wanted to work for them one day.” Though still very young, she embraced her father’s passion for environmental activism and developed a true awareness of the world she was growing up in. “I gave a class presentation on global warming in the second grade,” she said. “Nobody even knew what it was, but I didn’t care. I knew it was important.”

Despite her shy nature, Jess was never afraid to speak out against the things she thought were wrong. “I saw the world’s problems as something that could bring people together and allow people to find solutions by building relationships and involving themselves in the community,” she said. She took every opportunity to educate her peers and to act as a bridge to knowledge, to power, and to the ability to use one’s voice for the greater good.

Jess From College, Take One

When Jess received her acceptance to UCSB, her family was ecstatic. Though money was tight, her father was extremely supportive of the college experience and pushed her to make the most out of her time there. And she fit right in. “Campus on the beach?” she said, “That’s a no brainer.”

She was determined to have meaningful interactions within the community by immersing herself in college life. She became involved with the Environmental Affairs Board, pushed herself to build relationships with others, and eventually turn strangers into friends. The social buzz of Isla Vista awakened something in Jess that inspired her to take risks and get out of her comfort zone. The openness with which students embraced meeting new people and engaging in new experiences surprised her. Inevitably, she was pulled out of her shell. “I began to experiment,” she said. “I’d walk down DP with my friends popping into each open door, where I knew I could always be met with a cold beer and a friendly smile.”

Jess began to feel connected to the community in a way that she had never experienced before. Throughout her childhood this sense of empowerment had stemmed from her relationships with her father and the environment. Now, she saw the ways that social relationships and meaningful interaction with others could contribute to a greater sense of awareness about the world, and an awareness of herself. She strived to continue on this new journey, and became a lively participant in IV's social culture.

Though the unique experience of living in IV was enlightening, it also brought about new temptations. Jess became caught up in the party scene and struggled with her academic responsibilities. She felt as though her time was better spent building bridges in the community, rather than being stuck in lecture halls all day. "My perspective changed," said Jess. "I questioned why I was even enrolled in school in the first place. I felt inadequate as a student, and disconnected from what was truly important in the world."

The classroom was a foreign place, which became no secret to her parents. After a family discussion, they decided that the best option for Jess was to take time off from school and move back home to Glendale. She was determined to make the most out of it, and make the most out of it she did. Through all these years, she had never lost sight of her childhood dream to work for GreenPeace. "I emailed them over and over again until they realized that I would not take no for an answer," she said. She was soon hired as Team Leader of the Frontline Program.

Working for her dream organization filled Jess with excitement and hope for the future. She fundraised, canvased, protested, and engaged in activist training. Though this gave her valuable experience in the way that nonprofits run, she realized that there were better ways to build grassroots coalitions and create a space for meaningful action. Jess pushed herself to think outside the box; she lived by the idea that wherever she took up space, she wanted to create a space for others to contribute their own voices and experiences. "Greater social change comes from everyday people," said Jess. "Everyone has a story. Everyone has something to contribute."

During her time at GreenPeace, she met some of her closest friends and future husband Daniel. "One quarter off from UCSB was transformed into a lifetime," Jess said. She soon became pregnant and married her best friend. The growth of their family pushed Jess and her husband to seek personal growth within themselves. So they decided to go back to school.

Jess From College, Take Two

Jess's affinity for the counterculture of IV pulled her back in and she decided to re-enroll at UCSB. After having the more traditional college experience of going out with friends and

partying on the weeknights, seven years later she returned to an entirely new adventure; one that included her husband and son Easton. Older and wiser, she began to see the community in a different way. Though she valued the knowledge that college courses could give her, she understood that the classroom was just not her thing, so she sought out learning experiences through nontraditional avenues. She researched the history of UCSB and the national environmental movement that began with the Santa Barbara Oil Spill of 1969. “What better place to revive sustainability movements than the birthplace of environmental activism?” Jess said. With her aversion to individuals in positions of power, Jess saw the potential of Isla Vista to become not only a community of leaders, but also a national leader in the environmental movement.

Jess explored long-range development options for the Isla Vista community. Like GreenPeace, she wanted to create a grassroots organization that could be run and grown from student residents living in the community, rather than from those already in power. “I wanted to engage people in a fun, yet effective way,” she said. “I wanted to create a learning space for people who felt more useful outside the classroom like me.” This time around, Jess sought a balance between her love for nature and her love for people. So she approached the unique party culture of IV from a different angle. “I saw the community and its residents as an energy source,” she said. “I wanted to find a way to transform that energy into something useful, something that would transcend normal social expectations.” The size, population, resources, and environmentally-oriented attitude of Isla Vista was the perfect place for that. Jess could simultaneously fulfill her desires of reviving environmentalism in Santa Barbara and building a grassroots organization in her own backyard.

Among all her research, Jess came across the profile of John Foran, a sociology professor at the university. After learning about his work toward fostering movements for radical social change and sustainable development, she knew she had to talk to him. She walked into his office without a clue of what she would walk out with. But it was a decision that would change the Isla Vista community forever.



John Foran,
Professor of Sociology at UCSB

“I had all of these ideas, but no clue of how to translate them into something real,” Jess said. “I was like the principal instigator, but John was the one who turned Eco Vista into reality, so I can’t take all the credit.” He began introducing the idea to people inside and outside the classroom, finding that there was a real desire and excitement for this project among students. Though the two of them would have to build this program from the ground up, Jess’s vision would soon become reality.

Taking Initiative, Isla Vista Style

Jess's desire to solve a plethora of political and social issues was mirrored in the creation of Eco Vista, which became an umbrella program for a variety of community-based sustainability initiatives. One branch, titled ["Cool Blocks."](#) focuses on reducing the carbon footprint and water usage of Isla Vista on a block-by-block basis. It partners with the UCSB Carbon Neutrality Initiative in hopes of making IV carbon neutral by 2025. Students and residents in the community can apply to be "Cool Block Leaders." These leaders organize a series of block meetings during which each household commits to taking eco-friendly action and changing their daily habits. This can range from turning off the lights and taking shorter showers to hosting a community garden in your backyard.



Students work on a backyard garden project

Though each home takes individual action to lower their own footprint, the Cool Block program fosters a collective reduction in resource usage and an overarching incentive to be friendlier to the earth. Not only that, Cool Blocks also creates a system of responsibility that holds households accountable to their commitments. Regular meetings and forming relationships with neighbors in the community encourages residents to stick to their promises for the greater good.

"I had always hoped that Eco Vista would inspire students to lead and empower them to take action for themselves," said Jess. "John and I got the process going, but these young people are the ones putting in the dirty work to create actual change."

Another central mission within Eco Vista is the Transition Town Initiative, which seeks to place Isla Vista on the map as a role model for other sustainable communities.

According to Rob Hopkins, the co-founder of Transition Town Totnes and Transition Network, [“transition” is a movement](#) that engages communities to address larger social issues by beginning at the local level. These towns seek to connect residents with nature and with one another, by “reclaiming the economy, sparking entrepreneurship, reimagining work, reskilling themselves, and weaving webs of support.” Instead of waiting for governments to act, residents take charge of the decisions that affect their daily lives.

While this national movement provides a framework of values and a toolbox for how to get started, every initiative reflects the specific needs and qualities of individual places. “For Isla Vista,” said Jess, “that means fostering renewable energy sources, public gardens, affordable housing, food security, and radical self-governance, among other things.”

As part of this initiative, Eco Vista has created affordable co-op housing to tackle high rent prices in IV and prevent student homelessness. It has expanded community garden projects and farmer’s markets to drive the use of sustainable food sources and end food insecurity. It has promoted an inclusive community-based culture by holding events like open-mic nights, at-home composting lessons, and eco-friendly cooking classes. Though these are only a few examples of ways that the Transition Town Initiative is being implemented in IV, there are tons of other options for students to become involved and learn about ways to personally contribute to a more sustainable home and environment.



Friends gather for a communal cooking class

“Currently, we are working on submitting the application,” Jess said. “And making Isla Vista nationally recognized as a transition town.” The official “transition town” label will open up new sources of funding and resources, as well as connect IV with a far-reaching network of like-minded communities. Jess hopes that this will accelerate the learning experience of students by broadening the scope and depth of different projects, which will foster more and more engagement from students and residents.

Though Jess had grown up with an anti-institutionalist mindset, she began to transform her relationship to power through leadership roles and especially through Eco Vista. By taking the initiative to catalyze this movement, Jess was able to create a program that encourages others to do the same. “Leadership is all about empowering others to use their gifts in an inspiring way,” she said. “It should be distributive, not centralized.”

“Though I had a vision of what I wanted Eco Vista to be, I was careful to make sure that it wasn’t all about me,” Jess said. “There should never be one person holding the power stick.” Eco Vista has transformed IV into a sort of ecosystem composed of natural cycles and contributors who are reliant on one another for everyday functions. Though students cycle in and out of Isla Vista every four years, Jess has been a constant source of stability and encouragement by reiterating the value of these initiatives and promoting a community of interpersonal relationships. This student turnover truly speaks to the fluidity of Eco Vista as a grassroots organization that is defined by those who are a part of it. Its initiatives are adaptable to the needs and interests of its members, yet work towards the same long-term goals of ecological justice and sustainability.

“I am extremely proud of Eco Vista and the things we have been able to accomplish in just a few years,” said Jess. Her priority has always been making activism accessible to students whose input is valuable yet often overlooked. “I wanted to give residents a voice,” she said, “and be able to show people that we are all called to lead.”

Looking to the Future

Today, Jess continues to attend meetings and coordinate big picture details with John. Though Eco Vista has been a central part of Jess’s life for several years, she hopes to soon pass the torch on to current students. “It’s really all about the students,” said Jess, “and I’m not a student anymore. Though I will always be their number one cheerleader.” After successfully acting as a bridge between the environmentally-conscious and social attitudes of Isla Vista, as well as between its residents and an empowerment to act, she has now set her sights on something bigger.

On December 6, 2019, Jess announced that she was running for Third District Supervisor, a local position that oversees parts of the central coast, including Isla Vista. Though she withdrew from the race in early February, she succeeded in drawing media attention and making Joan Hartmann's, the incumbent, campaign sweat a little. According to an article published by [The Santa Barbara Independent](#), Jess's candidacy could have hurt Hartmann's chances of winning the primary outright in March.

"I disrupted an election," said Jess. "So that's pretty cool." Though her chances of winning were slim, she received surprisingly positive reactions from certain residents who are tired of politics as usual and eager for a bold vision of change. "Typically, the same class of folks tend to run for these local positions. They're white, older homeowners, which is not the reality for most people in the Third District," said Jess. "We miss out on political participation from people whose stories and voices are valuable, simply because they're tired of the same shit."

Jess's love for Isla Vista, as well as her success with grassroots movements, gave her the confidence and drive to fight for those who are underrepresented both in politics and in activism. "Some of the most badass activists I know are senior citizens or mothers," she said. "We need to invite more of these folks into these spaces and show them that they're voices are being heard. This is where we will see the most change." Jess hopes to bring these minority groups into the civic engagement spotlight, just as she did for the residents of IV.

As a natural leader who resists being in control and instead works to provide a space for others' contributions, Jess has broken down traditional understandings of power. "The real power is with the people," she said, "and their participation in our democracy." When asked if she would consider running for local office again, Jess immediately replied with an "Oh yeah definitely." Now that she has the name recognition and gotten her foot in the door, all she has to do now is bust that door wide open.