



Episode 131: Climate Anxiety and Young People (Transcript)

Ike Evans: Into the Fold is part of the Texas Podcast Network, the conversation's changing the world. Brought to you by the University of Texas at Austin. The opinions expressed in this podcast represent the views of the hosts and guests and not of the University of Texas at Austin.

Esmerelda: So when we think of Earth Day, we think of spending the day planting trees and picking up trash, recycling. And although it's really important, it is a small impact on this greater problem that we have regarding pollution, regarding fossil fuels. So focusing more on advocacy to create this larger change that has this bigger impact on our climate and subsequently our earth.

Ike Evans: Hello and welcome to Into the Fold: The Mental Health Podcast. I'm your host, Ike Evans, and today we're delighted to bring you episode 131: Climate Anxiety and Young People.

Ike Evans: For a lot of reasons, in 2022, it is surprisingly hard for any news related to climate change to get a grip on people's attention. But you may want to pay attention to this. Just last week four climate scientists were arrested for locking themselves to an entrance to the JP Morgan Chase building in downtown Los Angeles. The action was part of an international campaign called Scientist Rebellion, involving more than 1200 scientists in 26 countries. The day of action came hot on the heels of a report by the intergovernmental panel on climate change, Working Group Three, which details the enormous gap between the mitigation that we need to do to avoid disaster and what we're actually doing. So, folks, however you slice it, climate change is an existential threat that's hard to wrap your head around and it shows in the mental health effects.

Ike Evans: A poll by the American Psychiatric Association released this month found that almost 60% of adults in the US agree that climate change is impacting the health of Americans. More than half of those surveyed reported feeling anxious about the effects of climate change on the planet. But that's only part of the story. Across all of their poll questions, younger adults expressed greater concern than older adults. Of those aged 18 to 34, two-thirds report feeling anxious about the effects of climate change compared with half of adults 65 years and older. Additionally 51% of respondents aged 18 to 34 were anxious about the impact of climate change on their mental health compared to just 24% of respondents 65 years and older. And finally, adults aged 18 to 34 were also more likely to say

they believed climate change was already impacting the mental health of Americans, with 57% answering in the affirmative compared with 41% for adults 65 years or older.

Ike Evans: This is far from the only evidence that young people are carrying more of the burden. All across the country, young people are bearing witness to the impacts of climate change on their mental health and on their futures. Our guests for today are Esmeralda Gonzalez, who is a first-generation graduate from the University of Texas at Austin, where she earned a BA in health and society and a minor in business administration. She is the Houston Environmental Justice organizer for Mi Familia Vota, and joining her is Angelica Razo, the Texas director for Mi Familia Vota. She first joined the organization in 2017 to lead the organization's youth leadership program in Houston. Esmeralda and Angie, I am so glad that you could join us.

Esmerelda: Thank you for having us. I'm happy to be here.

Angie: Great to be here.

Ike Evans: So my first question is for the both of you. I was just curious how you two know each other and how it is that you work together?

Angie: Esmeralda, I would really love for you to take that question first and then I can fill in the gaps.

Esmerelda: Yes, absolutely. So I know Angie through our organizing efforts with Mi Familia Vota, where she is the state director for the state of Texas. And I am interning with Mi Familia Vota under the environmental justice department where I work closely with her and other organizers in our efforts for Latino political engagement.

Angie: Yeah, and just to follow up to that, it's just been really great to increase our capacity for environmental justice advocacy and organizing on the ground. We can talk a little bit more later on about what we're doing, but we're really finding out it's strategy, it's planning, it's execution, it's on the ground. There's so many different facets of it. And so just really glad that now Mi Familia is at a place where EJ is really one of our largest programs and buckets of work.

Ike Evans: This episode will be coming out around Earth Day, and so I'd like for you to imagine a world in which you were running Earth Day. What would change about the overall message and what sorts of things would be emphasized most strongly?

Angie: Oh man, this is a really awesome question. I think I'm going to continue to reflect on this after our conversation. I think what really comes to mind is Earth Day is a moment within a movement versus just the moment and just the day. And so if I was running Earth Day, I really would think about the two different

spectrums in terms of people really celebrating and being in community and enjoying the earth's resources and everything that, because we live on this planet, what it's given us. And to really recognize that and to share that with one another. And then on the other spectrum, I think it would be this sense of urgency and drive for innovation and this combination of natural resources and innovations in this next era of technology where we don't have to sacrifice one over the other to get into this safe place where the earth is not constantly burning and we feel like our presence here isn't a threat to earth. And so I think of those two spectrums and struggling to see where you really bring people together with that in mind for Earth Day. Again, being a day that's just a moment in a larger movement.

Esmerelda: Yeah, I want to reflect a little bit on what Angie said about how it's a moment. It's one day out of the year that we focus a lot on our planet. I would want to change the message to make it something more with longevity. So not only is it this one day that we're focusing on our earth and appreciating what we have and protecting it, but extending that throughout the year, as well as focusing more on a macro scale versus on a micro scale. So when we think of Earth Day, we think of spending the day planting trees and picking up trash, recycling. And although it's really important, it is a small impact on this greater problem that we have regarding pollution, regarding fossil fuels. So focusing more on advocacy to create this larger change that has this bigger impact on our climate and subsequently our earth.

Ike Evans: Angie, you are Texas director of Mi Familia Vota. I would love it if you could give our listeners a general idea of the wonderful work that your organization is doing in the Houston area with respect to environmental justice.

Angie: Yeah. And I'll take a step back and say that our mission is to increase political power and representation in the Latinx community and in the immigrant community. And so we do that through increasing the electorate, so voter registration, making sure folks are aware about the elections, know why those elections matter to them. And more on the advocacy side, we really started to engage on environmental justice really at all levels of government. So locally we're part of a campaign and coalition with other partners that is really seeking to weatherize local community members' houses. And so we're thinking about Houston is really on the front line of increasing climate disasters, and those folks who are already marginalized continue to be compounded by these disasters that are really messing up their neighborhoods and their homes. And disaster relief is not coming fast enough to them.

Angie: So to really create a network of resiliency and physically weatherizing and retrofitting their homes so they can be a little bit more prepared for the next disaster. So that's one campaign we're working on. At the state level, TCEQ, the Texas Commission of Environmental Quality, which is our state-level EPA, is undergoing review. And so it's really important for us that this huge state agency that really has their hands in a lot of different environmental issues, that the agency is built to serve the community, particularly of Houstonians through

our campaign, but really all of Texans. And so, as they're going through this review process, 2022 is really the year where we need to be providing public comment about how we want this agency to step up and be built in a way that it's serving the community.

Angie: So next year, when we have our Texas legislative session, the legislative body can take that into review and really ensure that the next phase of TCEQ is one that's responsive and respectful of what Texans are saying. And then we're going to start engaging locally in one of our suburban counties and looking to shut down a coal plant that's emitting so much pollution into the air. But really making sure that the Latino community, which has been historically disengaged in that area, is really owning that campaign, is aware of it and is putting their own spin to it. And just being culturally competent around how we're approaching this issue. And then just federally, we want to start engaging on the Clean Water Act, knowing that Texas is usually left off when we're talking about protecting waters and rivers and streams, just because we don't have a state-level body that's really taking that into consideration. So we really need the federal support through the Clean Water Act to make sure that some of our bodies of water that had been removed from the Clean Water Act are now being reinstated.

Ike Evans: So another thing that I'm wondering then is what strategies that you use to make a huge global issue like climate change locally visible and real to people who have myriad other problems and concerns in their lives.

Angie: Yeah. The other initiative that we have that's just really exciting is we're going to do a multi-phase research project, and it's focused on Latino perspectives on climate change. So we've identified some subgroups, which are young people, parents and community members, frontline workers, and also energy and oil gas sector workers. The focus groups are going to be some in English, some completely in Spanish, but the goal is really to understand how people are talking about climate change, and using their own language and the issues that is really coming to their mind. In the environmental justice advocacy work, we can talk about this all day long, sometimes we just miss the mark. Sometimes we get too technical. Sometimes we get too negative. And so it's really important for us, too, as environmental justice is becoming a growing program, that we pause and really take the time to listen from community members and go through a method in which we're gathering those responses and then testing them. Because that's something that we want to be able to continue to have a strong message.

Angie: But again, we're really using the language that people are using. Just from my own organizer experience, I started organizing about a year after Hurricane Harvey hit Houston. And so I saw a shift in how people started to talk about climate change. Climate change was something distant before Hurricane Harvey for a lot of the folks that I was engaging with, particularly young people. It was something that, yes, it's going to get worse. Yes, there's talks about this nationally and globally. But when Hurricane Harvey hit and the devastation that

it left, I think for a lot of folks, it was kind of like, whoa, this is going to continue to happen again. This isn't just something out of the blue. This is actually a pattern we've seen reoccurring, and local leaders have just neglected the policies that they need to put in place to make Houstonians resilient against the climate crisis that is already at our doorstep, literally with flooding waters.

Angie: And so when you think about the instances and how climate change might show up in people's lives and really listen to the issues that they're talking about, I think it's helped me as a former organizer and now more on the strategy side of, how are we taking this very overwhelming problem, but making it relevant to people. And not just, again, in a very negative way, but trying to identify what is are the tangible outcomes that we need to be achieving to increase people's quality of lives? I think the other one that has come up in a lot of my conversations is health. That's just a big issue. Pollutants in the air. People that are like, it's just so weird that there's a higher rate of cancer in my neighborhood.

Angie: Those are things that people might not come right out and say, but I think the great part about grassroots organizing is you get to know people and you get to speak to them honestly, and then you can thread out, oh wait, that's a real issue, and there's a real policy attached to that, and there's a decision maker attached to that frustration, that anger, that sadness that you feel. And so I think a lot of it is hear what people are going through and then take them along this journey of them really identifying the people that are responsible for their quality of life, the outcomes they're facing. And I think we're seeing that more and more with climate change, again, it's in our backyards and it's not an issue that we can ignore anymore.

Ike Evans: Okay, so these next few questions are for Esmeralda, and thank you for that, Angie. I have to frame this conversation in terms of mental health, and I know that climate change just because it's so profoundly affects not just health at the individual level, but resilience at the community level. So it has all kinds of intersects with mental health. But especially this whole idea of climate anxiety as it affects young people, especially. So I wonder how that shows up in your own life and how have you articulated it to other people?

Esmerelda: Yes. So climate anxiety is something that is very real, something I've seen in my community and my peers. And I related it a lot to the consumption of media by specifically young people. Where since, at least I remember the start of the pandemic and when the Black Lives Matter movement started, there's just been a shift in the way we relate news. So now you can find out so much more information on social media, like Instagram, where there are infographics where you learn about these issues happening all over the world. So you're constantly consuming this media of how these climate disasters are impacting people across the globe. And it can take a toll on you when you go to Starbucks and you go out to eat and you're handed a plastic straw or plastic silverware or a plastic bag, and you just think to yourself, wow, I just saw a photo of a turtle with a plastic straw in his nose and now here I am contributing to this problem.

Esmerelda: So it just creates an environment of anxiety where you go about your day, your week, your life, just worrying about the smallest things that you do and how it can impact someone across the world or right in your own backyard. And I've also seen it related to apathy. So not only about your individual actions, but how the world is shifting around you. So I've heard terms that my friends use like, "Well, if we're not going to be around on this Earth that long due to global warming, what's the point of even getting a degree? Why are we setting these long term goals when there's a possibility that we won't ever be able to reach them due to climate change?" So it's just a constant cycle of being hyper aware of your surroundings and what's going on, and then the impact that it takes in your body and your mind.

Ike Evans: I would love to know more about your goals as environmental justice organizer and how you're trying to go about achieving them.

Esmerelda: Yes, absolutely. So my main goal is to be able to support the environmental justice coordinator, and whatever efforts that Mi Familia Vota has set. But my true goals rely in education, so spreading information about how one can go about public testimony and show that this is not something that only people who have years of political experience can do. If you're interested or you have concerns, you as a citizen of the state of Texas are entitled to be able to speak on your opinion in front of the legislature. So just informing my peers on that and what power they have, not only my peers, but my community, the community in the state of Texas. This is just something that's very, very important to me.

Angie: I just want to jump in and just really harp on the point that Esme said. It is so important to have people of all backgrounds, of all ages, whether they have no political experience or not, getting involved in the work. Because historically there has been so much intimidation and just entering the spaces into the Texas legislative halls, going into City Hall, knowing who our representatives are. And so peer-to-peer empowerment is so monumental. I think that's how we're really trying to build the movement. And I really just want to send the strong message, to be an organizer, you don't have to have a resume. To engage people, you learn that on the spot. That's enthusiasm, that's a desire for better good. And so I think it's really just breaking down these stereotypes of who is an advocate? Who is a leader? And this culture shift that we're trying to really be part of in the Latino community when historically we've been secluded, isolated, and literally had barriers put up and intentional lack of education. And so I think what Esme was just saying is just very powerful.

Esmerelda: Yeah. I totally agree with what Angie's saying. There's no one vision of what an advocate looks like. I remember my first time advocating in front of City Hall, I was 12 years old and I had no idea what was going on. But there was this teenager who grew up with my older sister and the union they were working with together who really trained me and told me everything. It was very digestible for me as a child to learn that this is what advocacy is, and there's not just one way to advocate. So starting off young and with a community of peers,

like Angie said, is very important. Just one on one with people you know. It's just a lot more helpful to be able to advocate that way.

Ike Evans: About the opportunities for youth leadership that an issue like this presents. In your opinion, and I realize that activism of any kind, it's a social activity and you'll get along with some people and not others. But has it generally been the case that people have been receptive to your own wanting to claim the mantle of leadership? Or have you ever sensed any resistance that you've had to overcome?

Esmerelda: I believe that there's been more of a let go of this issue and having it be handled by the younger generation. They've been accepting of it, mainly because I've also heard arguments that, especially older populations, people who are over the age of 60, they feel as if their time on this earth is already up and what's the point of them trying to make a difference or continuing to advocate if they're not going to be here by the time that substantial change is done for climate change to be impacted? So letting go and letting the young people have that, because it's something that's going to affect them more I've seen is very common. But young people are also very enthusiastic and passionate about this issue, because it is something that will impact us more in the future. So there is an acceptance towards it and more of a want by the younger generation.

Ike Evans: Do either of you have any personal stories from the community that testify to the impact that you're hoping to achieve?

Esmerelda: Yeah, I can go back to the story I was mentioning in the second question you asked me.

Ike Evans: Yeah, sure.

Esmerelda: So, like I said, I want to focus on educating other people and creating advocates out of people who feel like they aren't able to, because they don't know enough, they don't have the resources to, just psyching themselves out of it. So, like I mentioned earlier, I was an advocate for my mother and my sister who both worked in the catering department at the Bush Intercontinental Airport here in Houston. So they needed someone who didn't look like an advocate to be able to speak up on this issue to make their story more impactful. So I was a child. I spoke about how this company is taking advantage of my mom and the heartbreak I see every day about how this company is treating her. And it really made a difference in the way these stories were told in front of City Hall and the way that they were receptive by the members of Houston City Council. So just looking back on the way that my experience began and how I felt empowered by other people and wanting to take that and create the same experience for others is something that is very dear to me and very important.

Angie: You know, I think a lot about some of the students that I got to work with several years ago and where they are in their lives now. There's a particular

example of one of our youth leaders who had been with us for several years, and she was really interested in environmental justice, and she decided to get more involved in with more of our campaigns. Well, when the City of Houston released a climate action plan, there was a need that they, as they're executing this plan, you're getting input from community members. And so they started setting up task force and we pushed for one to be set up for young people. And so, one of our youth leaders actually got to sit on the youth task force for the City of Houston's climate action plan. I think that's really powerful that I think to me, when I think about ultimately political power and representation in organizing is that folks that look like us, that have experiences that are impacted, that they get to be part of the decision-making process.

Angie: That is what power means to me. It's not just constantly fighting for your voice to be listened, but that you get to be the leading voice and that you get to bring other people along with you. And so I think of some of our other students who have been like, "I didn't know what civic engagement was. I didn't know why it was so important to have political power. I didn't know who my representatives were." And how they start to really change their life's trajectories in terms of what they want to study in college, what type of internships they want to do. We have a lot of folks interested in journalism. What kind of journalism and what kind of narratives they want to get out there. Because that, to me, is contributing to this cultural change that we want to see in our society where you see community members really coming into their own and using their own individuality to spotlight this issue and to inch us forward.

Ike Evans: So it is my sense that the climate justice movement is probably more diverse than would've been the case back in the nineties, for example. Both in terms of racial and ethnic diversity, or as we've been talking about, the opportunities that there now are for younger people to take the reins. But do you have a sense, and I hope this isn't too much of a leading question, that there is still a ways to go in making climate change seem like it's something that is in particular relevant to black and brown communities?

Esmerelda: Yes, absolutely. I'm currently a sociology student here at the University of Houston, so I do a lot of focus on disparities in our society. And doing this research on the way climate impacts different communities, especially black and brown ones, is related to socioeconomic status. So there is definitely some truth to that, and we can definitely uplift these voices and create a more impactful story or a more impactful argument to create a bigger importance on climate change by telling these stories, going into these communities and asking why their children have higher rates of asthma? Why there are more children who have cancer in these areas? And just how it's impacting everyone's day to day life.

Angie: Yeah, we definitely have a ways to go, and I celebrate those who have come before us to really allow us to now be leaders in this space. But I also think about, for me, it would be just a darn shame if we had reduced carbon emissions and we had done all these great things and you still had disparities in

communities in terms of education, in terms of income, in terms of health, in terms of who got to benefit from this new era that we're going to enter. So I think about as we're going into clean energy, what is the workforce development going to look like? What does that just transition really look like? What do business owners... Can we be part of owning those small businesses for clean energy?

Angie: Are we talking about that with the students in our high schools? Texas Public Schools, 80% are folks of color, young people of color, that are the new generation of Texas. Texas doesn't look like what it looked like 50 years ago. And so we're really dreaming big and thinking big and problem solving. Are we being intentional at every single point along the way that impacted community members get to be part of those conversations and get to be the beneficiaries, not just the workers for this new era, but really the beneficiaries. Because we've been doing this work. I'm still learning a lot of the environmental justice organizing history that's existed in Texas, because it's been living in small workrooms and staff rooms in different non-profits siloed, and I really see us all coming together, starting to share this story. But really thinking deeply about what can we not repeat again? What are we really going to leave at the door this time? So we're just doing something completely different. I also think democracies plays a really big part of that. How are we changing democracy to also compliment our organizing efforts? So there's still some ways to go, but I'm also just really thrilled at the conversations and action plans that are starting to form now to get us there.

Ike Evans: My last question, what can people do who want to help?

Angie: You can volunteer with MFV, and I think that's so important. Just get involved. This is a really big election year for us. That's a whole nother hour of podcast, right? Why are these elections relevant to environmental justice? And so our activity ranges from voter registration, voter education, helping people along the voting process, showing up for campaigns. Esme can talk a little bit more about the EJ activity. Educating people. What information can we give you so you can go and talk to another person? And really just meeting with our organizing team and figuring out what time capacity do you have to give as an individual? And how can you be part of this just larger than life effort that's really happening across Texas.

Esmerelda: Yes. I agree with what Angie said, mainly in educating people. There is so much power in numbers, so educating as many people as you can and having them be aware of this issue and empowered enough to be able to speak on it is extremely powerful in this movement. Just having this great big support. Additionally, testifying in front of the City Council of the City of Houston and the legislative session in the state of Texas has been more accessible now than ever. You can just hop out a Zoom call for a few minutes and say what you have to say about how this is important to you and hop off. And that would've only taken like five to 10 minutes of your time. Not saying that it's the best system that we have yet. There are definitely some roadblocks in testifying for the session. But

just getting involved, moving your feet, making your voice heard, talking to your friends about this, seeing what they have to say, and then looking for organizations in your community. And if you don't see any, create one yourself.

Angie: Yeah. So visit us at mifamiliavota.org. Just one last plug there.

Ike Evans: So to everyone listening for this Earth Day, get involved, or at least find out about what is happening locally in your communities. There's no such thing as not having an ability to contribute something to what people are doing regardless of your level of expertise, like Angie said. Angie and Esmeralda, we were really happy that you could find the time to talk to us. The Hog Foundation thanks you, and best of luck with everything.

Angie: Thank you. Thank you. Happy Earth Day, everyone.

Esmerelda: Thank you so much. Happy Earth Day.

Ike Evans: Environmental justice is also woven into the Hog Foundation's Communities of Care initiative. When we launched communities of care in 2018, we took the opportunity to support a project, Healthy Outdoor Communities initiative that works to advance the equitable use of public parks and green space to improve mental health outcomes and quality of life for underserved children and families in the Houston area. For episode 124 of Into the Fold, we talked to Sheila Savannah, director of Prevention Institute, the organization that coordinates Communities of Care, and Kelly Burnett, activation and volunteer manager of Houston Parks Board and coordinator of Healthy Outdoor Communities. Here's a listen.

Ike Evans: My first question is for the both of you. It won't surprise most people that there's a disparity when it comes to access to outdoor spaces between black people and other people of color and whites. So what does the evidence say about how stark the disparity is and you can speak generally or just in terms of Houston, and the consequences of the disparity?

Sheila Savannah: Well, we know that the value of parks and green space and healthy environment has a tremendous impact on health. So I think when we look at the health disparities, we have to also look at what have been the investments in those communities? So in Houston, the health department has data that shows it used to be almost a Y pattern that followed the freeway system, and now it's kind of changed to what they call an inverted C or arrow pattern. And there's just certain communities across the north end of the city, down the eastern corridor, and then in the Southern portion of the city, and then a little bit toward Fort Bend and Gulfton and Alief that are communities that just struggle. And we also know that those are communities that have less trees, they have less large parks, and you have to start looking at how that correlates to health outcomes.

Sheila Savannah: It's been long known that people interact differently with parks and green space, but it has an impact on their health, whether they're running or walking or using it to gather or gardening or fishing. It just has all of these health benefits, and so I think when we look at those historic investments in parks, in green space, when we look at disproportionate placement of dumping sites locally, we have to really think about how is that impacting the health of those communities. And that's why we're really glad to be partnering with Houston Parks Board and the collaborative that they lead to try to change some of that here.

Kelly Burnett: Yeah, I like that you start with talking about the environment and answering that question, because it's really easy to... I see it most often flipped where people say, "Well, on our Bayou Greenways, why are the ones in certain neighborhoods always active and why are others not? Why are some communities embracing it and why are some not?" And you can look at the statistics of the health disparities, obesity, and diabetes and heart disease, some of these outcomes that we know exist, life expectancy, but it is more than just a choice. There's all these barriers that have added up decade over decade, sometimes nefarious, sometimes just by where it is. And I think it's going to take a lot of people, a lot of collaborations, to be able to start to chip away at that, because the gaps are huge, 20-year life expectancy differences

Ike Evans: That is from episode 124, Changing the Landscape: People, Parks, and Power. Look for it in our catalog or just follow the link in today's show description wherever you get your podcast. And that does it for this episode. We're so glad that you could join us. If you have comments on anything that you would like to share about the podcast, feel free to reach out to us at intothefold@austin.utexas.edu. Especially thoughtful comments will be acknowledged during a future episode. Production assistance by Anna Harris, Darrell Wiggins, Kate Rooney, just as taking care of ourselves enhances our ability to help others, so it is as well that by helping others, we enhance our own resilience. Please leave a review, subscribe to us on the podcast app of your choice. You can find us on Apple podcast, Google podcast, Spotify, Tune In, or Stitcher, among many others. Thanks for joining us.