



**"Veggielution is an oasis in the middle of the city."**

—Yazmin Hernandez Carbajal, Community Engagement Manager



# Veggielution

*Yazmin Hernandez Carbajal*

## De la Granja a la Cocina

With an elevated highway wrapping around Veggielution, entering into this community farm feels a little like stepping into the eye of a hurricane. The urban sound of rushing cars fades to white noise, and the rows of crops firmly take center stage.

“Veggielution is an oasis in the middle of the city,” affirms Yazmin Hernandez Carbajal, the nonprofit’s community engagement manager, “I think it’s the perfect combination of community and nature.” It’s the middle of a weekday at the farm and right now all is quiet. Yazmin—hose in hand, curly hair swept into a messy bun—is taking a break from handling offsite and onsite events to water the wisteria dome.

Though the plants grow uninterrupted this afternoon, they receive a considerable number of visitors the first Saturday of each month. At a quarter to

nine, this day commences with yoga at the outdoor pavilion. Flowing through vinyasa poses alongside the stretching limbs of sunflowers and corn stalks allows people to peel away urban worries and slip into a replenishing mindset.

The currently hushed *Cocina* (“kitchen” in Spanish) fills with sounds of students chopping veggies and called instructions from East San Jose-based chefs and home cooks, all working toward seasonally-centered, culturally-relevant recipes. The surfaces of the picnic benches, now empty save for a solitary googly eye, become covered with arts and crafts projects. The farm stand’s closed doors open and freshly harvested veggies are deposited into large bins. The vacant youth garden floods with enthusiastic youngsters and their guardians, everyone wielding wheelbarrows and watering cans.

In this fenced-in part of the farm, kids learn about agriculture, pull weeds amid its beds and trees, and carry greenhouse sprouts to be transplanted in their new home. “I don’t think a lot of kids know how food grows,” Yazmin says. “I think it’s a ‘wow’ moment for them when they pull out a plant and... there’s potatoes all over!”

Veggielution first took root over a decade ago when three San Jose State students recruited homeowners around the campus to lend their front and back yards with the mission of bringing people together through environmental stewardship. Eventually, after stumbling on an empty six and a half acres of parking lot at East San Jose’s Emma Prusch Farm Park, they gained permission to transform it into the community farm it is today.

Yazmin’s own journey carried her in unexpected direc-

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tions. As a child, she experienced a harsh reality in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, a city suffering significant sex trafficking and financial hardship. She survived a kidnapping attempt at 9, another at 10. After coming to the States, she initially struggled finding where she fit into the community. “But when I came here to Veggielution, everything got a little more aligned,” Yazmin says. “I felt a lot more supported in my immigration status.”

She fondly recalls first discovering Veggielution when her “hippy-ish, environmentally-driven” friend dragged her along to one of the *Cocina* classes. That day, Montserrat Ayala (owner of Vitamina Juices & Blends and a fellow immigrant) taught how to make Aztec Tor-

tilla Soup. When Yazmin asked how she could get involved, she was offered the instructor position for the following month’s class. “I was like, ‘Hell yeah!’ I made basmati rice and middle eastern-oriented veggie kababs with yogurt sauce.” Determined to make this her community, Yazmin regularly volunteered until she joined the staff full-time.

Among her other duties, Yazmin coordinates Veggielution’s Eastside Grown, a training program for local food entrepreneurs to provide training and mentorship as well as connect them with residents and resources. Fellows of the program help work Veggielution’s food carts deployed at events across the city.

Eastside Grown and Veggielution’s other offerings show that people, like plants, grow best when specific conditions and environments are met. When nourished by a welcoming community, when provided with a healthy dose of nature, and when enveloped in a new sphere that engages in ways that school, work, and home don’t, individuals blossom. It’s a space of self-care that will enable community members to root out the stresses of the everyday, plant moments of rest, and turn their faces toward the sunshine. “Come and visit!” Yazmin extends a personal invitation. Come and visit this place that cultivates the potential of both people and plants. 