

THE GREEN FACTOR: BRINGING IT HOME



Olivia Ortiz is a Mexican-American feminist activist, a writer, and a staffer at WAGES, where she serves as VISTA Development & Communications Associate.

I spoke with Adela recently about her experience at Natural Home Cleaning, the Oakland-based co-op where she has been a member for three-and-a-half years, and about her family. Originally from Michoacán, Mexico, Adela now lives in Fremont with her three children, two boys and a girl – Omar 13, Yarely, 10, and Alexander, 5. For Adela, the last 10 years has involved working a variety of jobs in the cleaning industry seeking better opportunities to support her family. Before joining Natural Home, Adela worked around-the-clock, mostly at night, cleaning tables at a restaurant. Eventually, she began to experience nasal problems, trouble breathing, and lots of irritation in her eyes, but otherwise she considered her job pretty good. Her boss was kind and pay was steady, but benefits were nonexistent; it was only after four years on the job that she was given a week off from work, unpaid.

Adela's mother, Elida, is one of the founding members of Natural Home and has been with the co-op for eight years. She encouraged Adela to leave her job and join Natural Home, explaining the benefits of working with only natural, non-toxic cleaning products. After some prodding, Adela heeded her mother's advice and joined.

When I sat down to talk with Adela, I found her presence reassuring. She is earnest, endearing, and all smiles. I ask her what have been the advantages she enjoys most about working in the co-op, and she immediately has an answer: spending more time with her children. Since she started at NHC her

children are very happy that they see her more often. "They understand it is an added benefit that we get to spend more time together. Having a job like this, the stability gives us all better opportunities." She says she is very grateful that she is no longer subject to threats of termination or reduced pay if she needs to take her child to the doctor or attend one of their school functions.

I ask Adela how she tackles cleaning in her household. "My kids help me. They straighten up and clear clutter," she says with a pleased smile. "And even though they don't like the smell of it, they use vinegar to clean." She says she explains to her children that natural cleaning products are healthier for her as well as for her clients and their families. Adela admits that it was not so easy to switch to natural cleaning products at first, but she uses them now, especially after experiencing the dramatic change in her health. She has replaced her old cleaning products with natural products, no longer using harsh cleaners, or products with bleach.

Hearing her say this, my eyes grow big with surprise, and a small chuckle surfaces from Adela. In a Hispanic home *not* using bleach is quite a statement. It is a sea change, in fact, in an age-old cultural practice that emphasizes the unwavering use of "cloro" (as it is known in Spanish) to guarantee a clean home. I tell her how difficult it has been convincing my family to cease using toxic chemical cleaners, and we both laugh.

"I have a friend," Adela says, "who also cleans houses but uses traditional, chemical cleaners that are very irritating. When she asks me if the natural products I use really work to remove stains, I tell her, yes, perfectly. But she will not stop using the chemical products." Why not, I ask? Doubt? Disbelief? "No," she replies quickly. "Her customers are accustomed



to specific products to guarantee a 'clean' house. She would risk losing her clients if she changed the products she used."

After a moment, I ask Adela more about her children; what do they want to grow up to be? "My daughter, Yarely, tells me she wants to clean houses just like me when she grows up," says Adela, "And I tell her, 'Okay, but study hard first then decide later what you want to do.'" I pose the question to Adela that perhaps Yarely will grow up to invent new green cleaning products. "Yes, I want her to realize that she can be anything she wants."

I am eager to hear more from Adela, the young mother and professional who is educating her household and transforming cultural traditions one practice at a time. But our time is running short, and the interview wraps before I am able to tell Adela that of one thing I am certain. Whether Yarely will follow in her footsteps is to be seen, but it is clear that ambition, independence, and perseverance run deep within her family, the makings of a very bright future for any career Yarely may choose. ■

Recruitment has started for new members for WAGES' Concord co-op project, and sales are growing!

WOMEN WORKERS BUILDING A BETTER WORLD



Photo by Stephanie Hallett

This year marks the 100th anniversary of International Women's Day, a global day celebrating the economic, political, and social achievements of women. And for working women across the globe and here in the US, a shift is occurring in the world of domestic labor and the cooperative movement indicating issues like workplace equality and the cooperative enterprise model are gaining prominence with the general public and workers the world over. In a move designed to raise awareness and increase support, as well as promote co-op formation and growth, the United Nations General Assembly has declared 2012 as the International Year of Cooperatives (IYC). Activities for the IYC will begin with a global campaign launch in New York City later this fall, followed by a series of regional assemblies across the globe, culminating in a conference, "Cooperative Responses to Global Challenges," scheduled for spring 2012 in Poland.

The yearlong campaign is meant to highlight the contribution of cooperatives to socio-economic development, in particular recognizing their impact on poverty reduction, job creation, and social transformation. The International Year of Cooperatives campaign includes broad support from UN agencies and member states as well as support from academia, the private sector, and the media. WAGES is supporting the IYC in the lead up to the launch of the campaign through our social media outlets and e-communications. Closer to home, on July 1, 2010, in a victory six years in the making, New York became the first state ever to enact a comprehensive bill of rights for domestic workers that guarantees paid time off, legal protection from discrimination and harassment, and a minimum one day of rest per week. A similar bill was recently introduced in California. Drafted by Assemblyman Tom Ammiano (D-San Francisco), AB 889 would entitle California domestic workers – a workforce that includes housekeepers, nannies, and caregivers for the elderly and disabled – the right to paid time off and paid sick days, among other protections. Currently, a coalition of organizations from across the state is organizing workers and communities in support of AB 889. WAGES supports the coalition's efforts and the resolution to ensure dignity and respect for domestic workers. ■

For further information on the campaign, visit <http://www.nationaldomesticworkeralliance.org>

MAKE IT EARTH DAY YEAR ROUND

Carry the energy of April's Earth Day celebration forward into your everyday choices with these tips for your home.

☞ White vinegar! Keep it close at hand for everything from bringing shine to a hardwood floor, wood furniture, or to remove smudges from glass. A 1:3 vinegar to water solution works best.

☞ For an inexpensive DIY, natural air freshener, boil cinnamon, cloves, and orange slices for a sweet aroma. To make a custom-scented mist, mix water, rubbing alcohol, and essential oil.

☞ To clean your oven, remove rust, or maintain troublesome drains, baking soda is the magic trick. Lightly sprinkle the entire surface with baking soda, or make a paste of soda with a few drops of soap and water and let sit for several minutes. Follow with a good scrub using a plastic scouring pad or brush.

Have a tip or a story to share?
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A better living. A better life.

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OUR CO-OP NETWORK

ecocleaningnetwork.com

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415-285-5525

EAST BAY / CONCORD
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SOUTH BAY
Eco-Care
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A TIME TO GROW:

WAGES launches our ambitious new three-year plan to bring the benefits of cooperative ownership to women throughout the Bay Area... and beyond!

Over the next three years, WAGES will develop **THREE NEW CO-OPs** in the Bay Area, and begin expansion to a **NEW REGION** in another part of the state (or country)!

In March, we began the first of these projects in **CONCORD**, and our next co-op in **SAN JOSE** is planned for 2012. Stay tuned to learn where we will expand to next...

MORE THAN GREEN:

WAGES' outgoing Executive Director reflects on the many returns on our investment in women



Sometimes the view from afar brings things into clearer focus. Early this spring, during a trip to the East Coast, I had the opportunity to talk about WAGES

with some of our most valued supporters as well as to new audiences of corporate leaders and policymakers. It gave me a fresh perspective on our work.

At a national conference on “high impact strategic partnerships” in New York, I co-presented with Seventh Generation (SVG) about the benefits of the collaboration between WAGES and SVG, a socially-responsible “B corporation.” After our presentation, a corporate leader from the audience shared her appreciation for how SVG’s and WAGES’ closely-aligned missions and respective work fit together to make a unique contribution to the green economy. Indeed, mission alignment, creativity, honesty, and transparency are the key ingredients that have enabled us to do something together that neither organization could have done on its own. In these times of scarcity, our unique partnership is inspiring others to think about building creative alliances and finding new resources for community-based initiatives for social change.

After a short train ride down to Washington

DC, I joined our friends at the Corporation for Enterprise Development (CFED) to speak with policymakers on Capitol Hill. CFED’s policy expertise and WAGES’ success stories from the grassroots proved to be a powerful combination, and my testimony about the impact of cooperative business ownership for low-income women and their families was received with great enthusiasm. It’s good to have “friends in high places” who share our belief that creating greater economic opportunity for women is the best investment we can make in our local economies.

On the plane ride home, I mulled over the wealth of conversations I had during the trip. Speaking with such a diverse array of people and hearing their excitement for WAGES’ work reminded me that the value of our co-op members’ daily efforts extends well beyond their own communities and even beyond the cleaning industry and the co-op sector. In fact, they demonstrate a better way of doing business. The cooperatives we develop in partnership with immigrant women *truly* have a triple-bottom-line: they are profitable businesses that also care for the environment and enable women to earn a better living, build assets for their families, and grow both personally and professionally.

From the moment we launch a new co-op, WAGES keeps an eye on this prize, balancing three priorities that are often seen

As we grow, we are extending our programs to bring new **SKILL-BUILDING** and **LEADERSHIP** opportunities to co-op members, while also expanding **BUSINESS SUPPORTS** and **SERVICES** to create economies of scale through our co-op network.

as “either-or” choices: people, planet and profit. We teach co-op members to fulfill the rights and responsibilities of co-owning a business and to deliver a high-quality green cleaning service. We invest heavily in education, leadership development, and asset-building supports for members and also in evaluating the earth-friendliness of our products. And, at the same time, we tackle the work that goes into building any successful business from the ground up: business planning, managing start-up and growth, marketing and sales expansion.

Together, WAGES and the co-op members have inspired others across the country to pursue the dream of equitable green business and a more cooperative economy. For eight years, it has been my privilege and joy to work closely with our members and to learn from their professionalism, strength, and resilience. And it has been an honor to build creative partnerships with diverse allies who have helped us aspire to – and achieve – greater impact. As I leave the organization, I am delighted to know that WAGES will continue to launch new cooperatives and help many more women and families improve their lives, and that the impact of this work will continue to be felt far and wide. ■

Hilary Abell ends her eight-year tenure as WAGES’ Executive Director this spring.



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Home Green Home SF co-op member, Alicia, with Univision KDTV Ch. 14 news anchor, Flavio Lacayo. Univision spent a day with co-op members for a two-part story about worker-owned businesses.

STAY IN THE KNOW:

Find WAGES on **facebook** and visit our **YouTube** channel
search: Women's Action to Gain Economic Security

SPELLING SUCCESS THE GREEN WAY

Our FIVE member co-ops provide GREEN-cleaning services to over 2,000 households in the greater Bay Area, reaching over **\$3 MILLION** in sales in 2010!

Since 2007 WAGES has seen a **70% increase** in the number of **LOW-INCOME WOMEN** participating as co-op members.

Our mission: WAGES (Women's Action to Gain Economic Security) builds worker-owned, green businesses that create healthy, dignified jobs for low-income women.

At WAGES' mature co-ops, women have seen a **71% increase** in household income. Membership is expected to **exceed 100 women** upon launch of our next co-op in San Jose!

WAGES is **LAUNCHING** a **NEW** co-op project in Contra Costa County.

If you're in the **SF Bay Area**, we encourage you to try out the **great service** from our co-ops:
ecocleaningnetwork.com/estimate