

Teen Leader »

Teen receives award for outstanding leadership in environmental and climate justice.

At 14 years old, Jonathan Ferrer began working at UPROSE, a nationally recognized organization that promotes community sustainability and resiliency, as a summer intern who had no idea of the environmental burdens of Sunset Park. He soon learned that his community is sandwiched between three power plants, a sludge transfer facility, dozens of former industrial sites, and a highway that carries 200,000 vehicles per day.

With this knowledge, Ferrer rallied his peers to action, mapping the neighborhood so as to inform the city where trees were most needed and convincing officials to expand the median on the six-lane street that residents cross daily. “It’s so important that young people have a voice in shaping their communities,” says Ferrer, who is now 18. “And we must use our voice to fight for the fair distribution of environmental burdens and amenities.”

Ferrer is one of 25 recipients of the 2014 Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes, which honors young people who have planned and carried out a significant service project to help others or the environment. The annual prize was founded in 2001 by bestselling children’s author T.A. Barron, in memory of his mother. Winners each receive \$5,000 to support their service work or higher education.

In 2010, Ferrer also mobilized youth to help with a voter referendum amending the City Charter to reduce the number of environmental burdens in New York City’s low-income communities. He has testified in front of the EPA, warning that climate change-related storm surges along Sunset Park’s industrial waterfront could unleash toxic waste into the water and air. “I really cared about fair share being implemented in the city,” Ferrer says. “I know all



Ferrer advocates for environmental and climate justice in his community of Sunset Park, Brooklyn.



Jonathan Ferrer, 18

Courtesy Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes

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of this won’t disappear, but we can at least aim for fair share of it.”

Since Hurricane Sandy hit, Ferrer has facilitated meetings for the Sunset Park Climate Justice and Community Resiliency Center, a group launched shortly after Hurricane Sandy to educate residents about affordable climate adaptation projects they can implement, such as painting roofs white and planting more trees.

Ferrer has worked at the NYC Climate Justice Youth Summit for the past several years, which he says he’s found immensely rewarding. “Last year when I spoke, 700 kids that all kind of looked like me were silently in the audience, waiting to hear me speak about an issue I’m so passionate about,” Ferrer says. “It was the summer, and they all could have been outside or doing what they want, but instead all 700 of them went out of their way to learn. That was so rewarding. It proved to me that people in my generation can make a difference.”

Ferrer’s prize money will go toward his tuition at Rutgers University, where he began studying computer engineering in September.

For more information on the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes, including a complete list of this year’s winners and instructions on how to nominate a young hero in your community, visit barronprize.org. —*Shara Beitch*