Safeguarding the California Coast: Erica Fernandez

from *Heroes of the Environment*

When 12-year-old Erica Fernandez volunteered to help clean up the beach in her new hometown, Oxnard, California, she could barely speak English. She had no idea then that within four years, her passionate speeches for the environment and social justice would inspire thousands of people to action—and help change the mind of the governor himself.

Back then, in 2003, she was just a kid helping 20 adults take care of the beach. She and her family had recently arrived in California from a small town in Mexico. “I always loved the ocean,” she says, “so it made me really sad to see this beautiful beach full of trash. That’s why I decided to help.” Her dedication impressed the adults in the group. One woman—the only one who spoke Spanish—started explaining to Erica that something far more dangerous than trash threatened the beach.

There was a plan to build a processing station for liquefied natural gas 14 miles (22.5 kilometers) off the coast of Oxnard. It would be like a giant factory, 14 stories high and three football fields long, floating in the ocean. A pipeline 36 inches (almost a meter) in diameter—as big around as a hula hoop—would transport this highly explosive gas under the ocean to Oxnard, and then right through Erica’s community.

“At first I couldn’t believe it,” she says. “I was really shocked. What if there was a leak or an explosion? People could get killed!” She asked around in her community and found out that nobody knew about the project. “We were going to be in danger from this facility, and the company wasn’t even telling us about it.” Erica started going to meetings with her friends from the beach cleanup to educate herself about what was happening.

Behind the new project was the largest mining company in the world, based in Australia. Their plan was to condense natural gas into a liquid by “super-cooling” it to around -260 degrees Farenheit, and then ship it to their new floating processing station off the Oxnard coast. There, the liquid would be heated up until it was a gas again and would be sent out via pipeline to customers in California and the Western United States.

The process would send over 200 tons of air pollution per year across the 14 miles of ocean to Erica’s community. Not only that, the station would take in millions of gallons of seawater per day to cool its generators, and discharge the water more than 28 degrees Fahrenheit hotter than the surrounding ocean. This hot wastewater (called “thermal waste”) would cause serious harm to the surrounding ecosystem, killing zooplankton (very tiny floating creatures) and small fish critical to the survival of marine mammals and fisheries.

“Their point of view was that it was a cheaper gas,” Erica explains. “They never considered the health of the people. They never considered the safety issues. Their idea was just to make money, and that was all.”

Erica started going door to door in her mainly Spanish-speaking farmworker community. She pointed out where the big gas pipeline was going to cross people’s yards and the fields where they worked. Escaping gas could cause an explosion and fire, she explained, and operations out in the ocean would make the air dirtier. People were already suffering because of pollution from a nearby power plant. “Many people had to use respirators to breathe, including my father. I didn’t want to end up like that. I didn’t think anybody should,” [said Erica]. Erica’s neighbors were worried, but they didn’t know what to do.

Erica didn’t know, either, but she cared too much to stay silent. Having grown up in the tiny town of Gómez Farías, in the Mexican state of Michoacán, she had a strong motivation to care for nature. “We grew our own food and raised our own animals. Taking care of nature was part of survival.” She wanted to bring the same spirit to her new life in California.

She joined her friends in weekly protests at the office of the natural gas company. Prospects of stopping the project did not look good. The governor was in favor of it, and so were the powerful state commissions that would have to approve it. “The word on the street was that there was nothing we could do.”

Behind the scenes, however, opposition was growing, and Erica was becoming the spokesperson for the youth of the town. As her English improved, she talked to kids in her high school about what was going on. She regularly walked her neighborhood along the route of the proposed pipeline, using a hula hoop to show people the size of the pipe that would pass by their houses and under their elementary school. She talked to church groups. She talked to the media, and stories about the dangers of the proposed facility began appearing in the press. She gathered a group of young supporters to come with her to demonstrations. Important environmental groups like the Sierra Club took notice and began helping with the campaign.

After four years of educating people about the dangers of the natural gas project, Erica was ready for the next step. The California Land Commission, which would rule on the natural gas company permit and review its environmental report, had scheduled a public meeting for April 9, 2007. In an amazing show of opposition to the project, Erica helped bring 3,000 people to a demonstration outside the commission offices. More than 300 of them were high school students.

Inside, Erica was one of the opposition speakers, representing the youth. “I didn’t know if they would listen to me. My English wasn’t good and I was only sixteen,” she says. As she nervously approached the microphone, she was informed that time was running out. One minute and thirty seconds was all she had. “I couldn’t give my prepared speech, so I just spoke from my heart.”

The result was electrifying. When Erica was finished, people stood up and broke into applause, even though clapping was not allowed at the hearings. One of the commissioners said, “I’m very moved by your testimony, Erica. When I was your age, I was playing video games.” The commission voted 2-1 against the proposal.

Three days later, Erica spoke at a meeting of the California Coastal Commission, which oversees the well-being of the California coast. Again, her testimony was well received, as were the statements by other speakers from the environmental and citizen groups. The commission voted 12-0 to reject the natural gas proposal.

Erica was jubilant, but she also knew that the governor’s decision lay ahead. Unless he also rejected the proposal, it would be approved. It was well known that he favored the project.

“We made thousands of phone calls and sent thousands of postcards telling the governor why this facility was a bad idea,” [says Erica]. In July 2007, the governor made an unexpected move: He vetoed the project. Erica and her friends had won! Other companies have since tried to push through similar projects, but now there are many more environmental requirements for approval—and Erica and the thousands of people she inspired are keeping watch.

Only the second person in her family to go to college, Erica wants to become an environmental lawyer so she can fight for the environment and for the rights of communities. She wants other young people to speak out when they see something wrong, even if they feel shy about it at first. She likes to quote the words of her role model, César Chávez: “We are the future. The future is ours.”