



People Power

Marisela Castro saw kids sneak snacks into their backpacks at the afterschool program where she worked while attending SJSU.

“One boy confided that he hadn’t seen his father in a week and couldn’t remember the last time his whole family was together,” says Castro, ’12 Sociology/Criminology. “His parents were working nonstop at multiple minimum wage jobs.” Castro related to his hopelessness. She saw her afterschool program students struggle academically and develop behavioral issues likely because their families were barely making enough for necessities. “The situation created a drive in me to find a solution,” she says.

In Professor of Sociology Scott Myers-Lipton’s fall 2010 Wealth, Poverty and Privilege course, Castro explored how low minimum wages perpetuated poverty, and something clicked for her. “I had to increase salaries somehow. I did a lot of research and I couldn’t let this idea go.”

But it wasn’t easy. As a transfer student, Castro didn’t know anyone. She couldn’t generate interest for her idea until she took a social action course in spring 2011, where Leila McCabe, ’12 Sociology, and others joined the effort. Class research showed that a city-wide minimum wage increase would stimulate the local economy without growing unemployment or harming small businesses, and it would help low wage workers afford Silicon Valley’s steep housing costs.

McCabe created the Campus Alliance for Economic Justice, CAFÉ J, which began meeting with community, faith and labor leaders to plan to raise San José’s minimum wage from \$8 to \$10 an hour.

The student coalition raised money and awareness, and organized volunteers who collected 36,000 signatures—almost double the required amount—to place Measure D on the November 2012 ballot. It passed with 60 percent of the vote, showing *“if you work hard and play by the rules, you deserve a fair wage,”* Myers-Lipton says.

“Now that the measure has passed, I feel motivated to make more change,” says McCabe, who worked as a minimum wage server and barista before graduating. “Change can be made through the system we have.”

Santa Clara County Supervisor Dave Cortese says, “This campaign was successful because these San José State students did not take no for an answer. They believed that our residents deserve the chance to make a fair wage to provide for their families.”

Single mom and current CAFÉ J President Elisha St. Laurent will graduate with a degree in behavioral science and sociology this spring, and has worked in minimum wage retail jobs since she was 14. “It was hard to pay bills, feed my six-year-old and not depend on government assistance,” she says. “I wanted to be free from relying on others, to make a change within my own family and in my community. By being involved in this campaign I’ve done exactly that. I have a voice and I’m going to use it.”

The \$10 rate began on March 11, 2013, a change these women credit to “people power.” Cortese says, “When told that the campaign would fail, these students pulled themselves up by their bootstraps, pounded the pavement and led a

grassroots effort to ensure people who work hard for a living should not be forced to rely on government subsidies.”

St. Laurent advises, “Don’t leave it to someone else to make a change. It takes one person to inspire another, and that person can be you.”

—Karin McKie

The story of how these students got the minimum wage raised was told in The Nation, The Wall Street Journal and on MSNBC. Visit sjsu.edu/wsq to read more.



MARISELA CASTRO AT MEASURE D AWARENESS EVENT. PHOTOS: SCOTT MYERS-LIPTON

AMONG THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE MEASURE D AWARENESS EVENTS WAS OLYMPIC MEDALIST, CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVIST AND SJSU ALUMNUS JOHN CARLOS.