

# Cultivating Connections: Leadership and Power Building for Merced School Equity

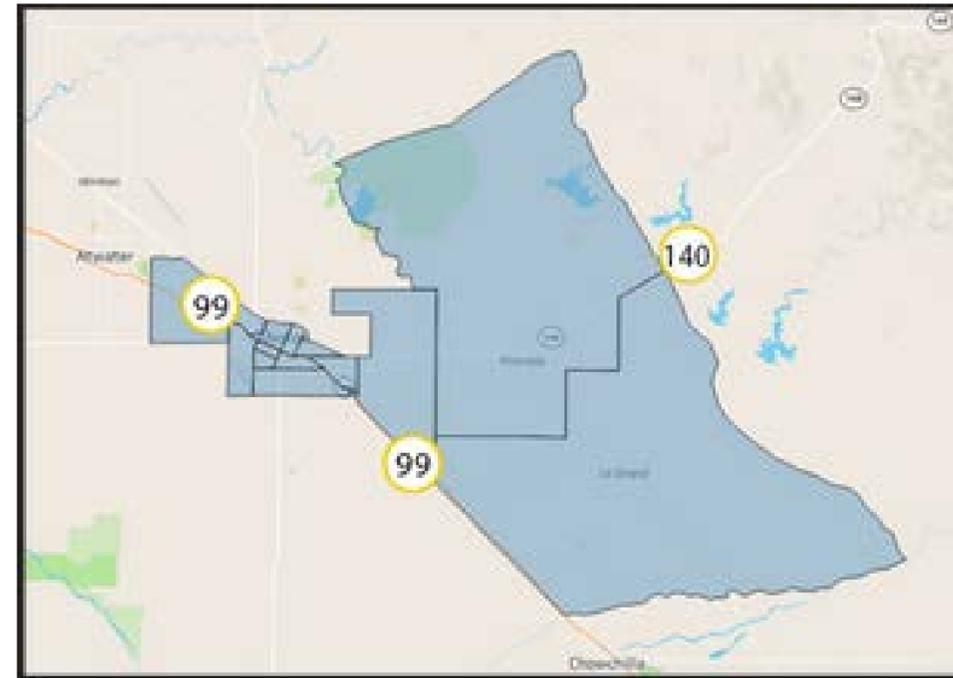
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# Background

**Building Healthy Communities (BHC)** was a 10-year place-based initiative funded by The California Endowment to advance statewide policies that directly address health inequities at the community level.



The Merced Place is made up of southwest Merced and east Merced County.

# Introduction

BHC Merced has focused on providing a platform for residents and creating change within three major focus areas:

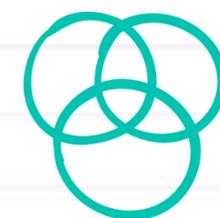
\*\*BHC Merced transitioned to Valley Onward (a 501 c(3) non-profit organization) after the BHC initiative finished in 2020.



Restore and improve school climate



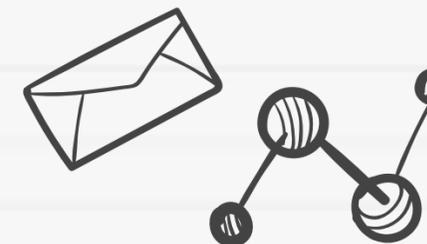
Improve neighborhoods



Expand healthcare systems and access

# People Power and Power Building

*People Power*<sup>1</sup> refers to **building communities** where “historically excluded adults and youth residents have voice, agency, and power in public and private **decision making** to create an inclusive democracy and close health equity.”



*Power Building*<sup>2</sup> is an investment in “an **emerging ecosystem of organizations** with diverse capacities, skills, and expertise”; these are then mobilized as resources to prioritize health equity in decision-making spaces.”

1, 2 Definitions come from The California Endowment from <https://www.calendow.org/learning/building-voice-and-power/>.

# Working Together: Building People Power in Schools



- Leaders from the **School Action Team (SAT)** came together to push for improvements in the school system and for youth.
- The SAT combined efforts with Merced districts for the implementation of restorative approaches within the school system rather than the previous zero tolerance policies.

# Working Together: Building People Power in Schools

BHC Merced and residents changed school systems and practices in Merced:

- How student needs are addressed
- How community is engaged in the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) and the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) processes
  - Parents were empowered through trainings
  - Planning meetings were moved to more accessible areas in the community



# BHC's School Action Team

## Before SAT:

- Community voices were excluded
- Access barriers at community meetings
- Few community leaders

## Impact of SAT:

- Authentic community engagement
- Community voices were central
- Increased joint decision making
- Residents held school-based leadership positions

# School Leadership: Stepping up for Merced Schools

- Tsia Xiong, active community advocate and parent
- One of the leaders for School Action Team (SAT)
- Motivated by personal experiences to improve inequities in schools



# School Leaderships: Stepping up for Merced Schools



Mercedes  
Rodriguez



1.

Former elementary  
school teacher,  
current resident  
advocate



2.

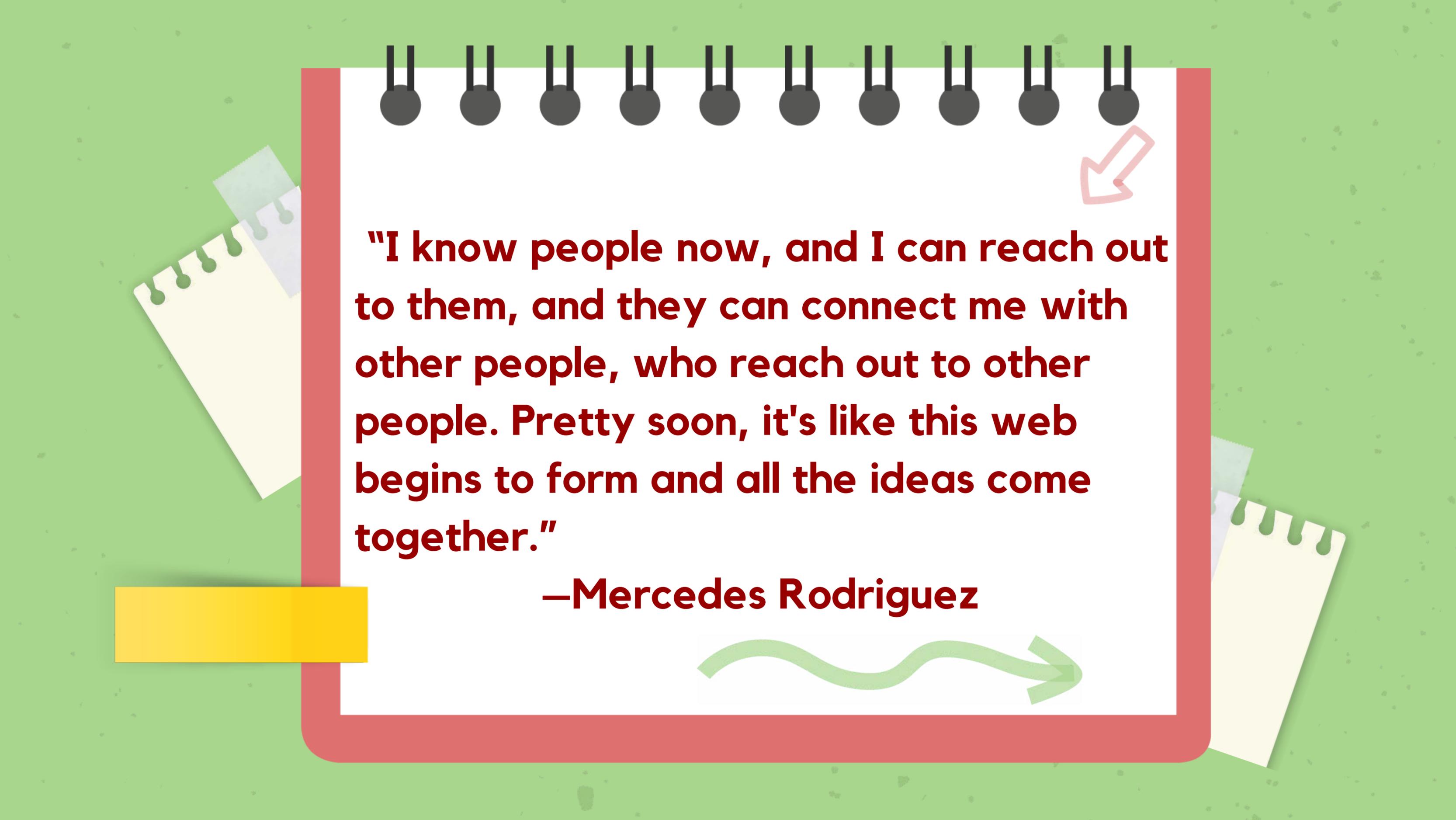
Learned about  
BHC Merced  
LCAP meetings  
through a  
friend

3.

Began to  
regularly  
attend  
meetings

4.

Significant  
support she  
received was  
from BHC  
Merced



**"I know people now, and I can reach out to them, and they can connect me with other people, who reach out to other people. Pretty soon, it's like this web begins to form and all the ideas come together."**

**—Mercedes Rodriguez**

# LCFF & LCAP



## The Local Control and Funding Formula (LCFF)

- Introduced in the 2013-14 academic year
- Purpose: to identify educational inequities
- Increase funds for underserved populations



## Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP)

- Tool to help institutions form plans and set goals for fund allocation
- Purpose: Improve student outcomes in partnership with local communities
- Resolution passed so budgets would require youth and parent involvement in decision making

# Restorative Justice in Schools: Breaking the School to Prison Pipeline



- Improve suspension and expulsion rates for students of color in Merced

- Provide students and parents with adequate resources
- Language accessibility
- Important to have culturally competent counselors working with students

## **Building Power and Capacity in Transformative Work**



- Xiong wanted to shift from advocating to organizing
- Public space for residents to speak freely = leaders



“Organizing is very intentionally helping people, nurturing their skills, and realizing their potential.”

-Tsia Xiong



# Overcoming Challenges



## Challenges:

- School materials lacked language accessibility
- Lack of transparency
- Meetings held outside of communities



## Improvements:

- Student handbook was translated into Spanish and Hmong
- Interpreters made available
- Meetings moved to school campuses





Increase parent involvement



Transparency between schools and parents



Prepare and empower parents with necessary materials



Empower and build leaders within the community

# What's Next

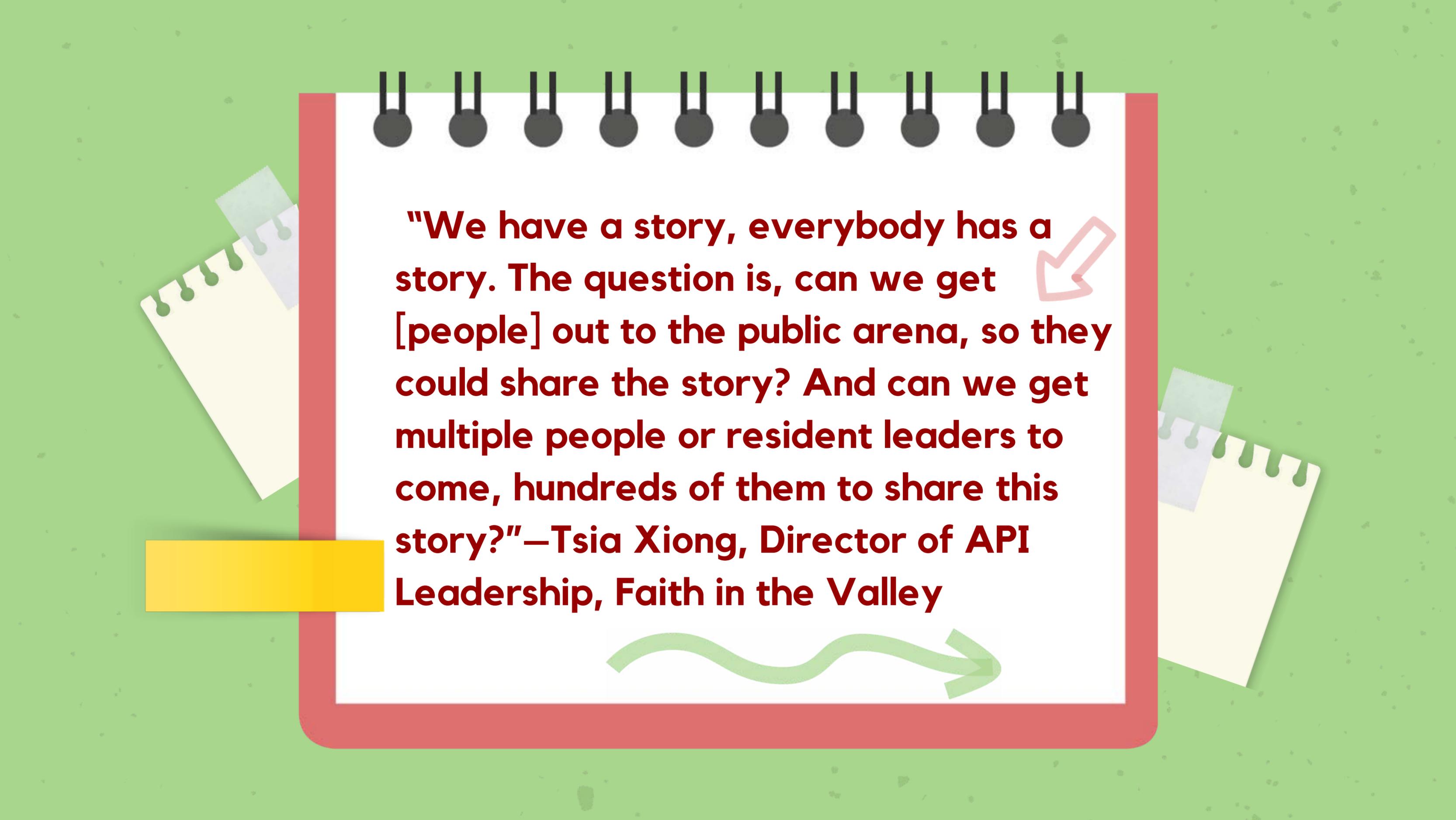


# Conclusion

- Xiong grew his leadership skills by nurturing leadership in others
- Continue to lift up community voices



- Increase inclusivity of voices from different backgrounds
- Rodriguez believes organizing is the key to long lasting change



**"We have a story, everybody has a story. The question is, can we get [people] out to the public arena, so they could share the story? And can we get multiple people or resident leaders to come, hundreds of them to share this story?"—Tsia Xiong, Director of API Leadership, Faith in the Valley**



For more information, visit us at [cvhpi.org](http://cvhpi.org).

Thank you to advocates and residents for their work.

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