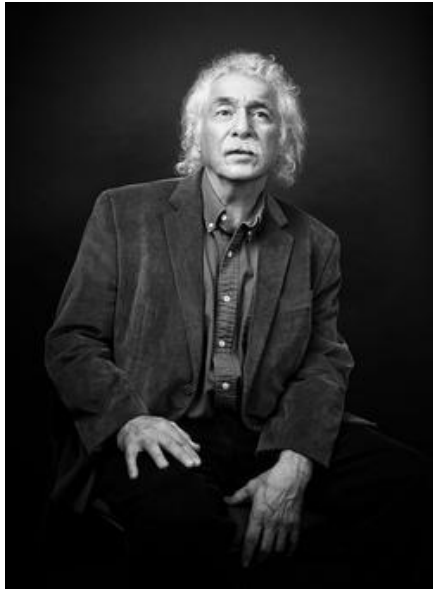


# Bill Gallegos: Cooling Dante's Inferno

By **Tibby Rothman** Thursday, May 19 2011



**At night, the now-banned** flares that once erupted from oil company smokestacks turned the industrial scape around [Wilmington](#) into Dante's Inferno, a postapocalyptic scene for drivers passing by on the I 10 freeway. But to families and children who worked and lived there and in nearby cities upwind, such as [Carson](#), [Huntington Park](#) and [South Gate](#), the flames' release of toxins was far from cinematic.

Some 18,000 Californians die each year from environmentally caused illnesses such as respiratory problems and cancer, according to the California Air Resources Board. [Bill Gallegos](#) notes that's six times as many lives as were lost in the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Annually. And they're preventable deaths.

"If another country attacked us and killed 18,000 people, it would be war — it would be on. Right?" he asks. Gallegos is executive director of Communities for a Better Environment (CBE), a 26-staffer nonprofit that teams with working-class neighborhoods to achieve environmental health and justice and supplies them with experts and attorneys.

Born into a Mexican-American family, Gallegos speaks English and Spanish. He also is fluent in a third language — the translation of oblique numbers to compelling human narratives.

Like those flares. To outsiders, the chemicals being emitted were "figures, so many units per second," Gallegos says. But to the people who lived nearby? "To us, it's, like, we can't breathe. The refineries say go home, shut your doors and close your windows. That's the 'protection plan.' "

Gallegos has experienced such "protection plans" firsthand. "I was born in Colorado. [Like] a lot of Mexican-American families, we had land, lost the land, and ended up in the coal mines and the railroads. I lost my grandfather and two uncles to black lung disease."

Now he works at CBE's office in Huntington Park, a city that feels the harsh effects of nearby refineries, power plants and diesel truck traffic — 19 miles from the ocean and made all the worse on hot days.

He got his first taste of organizing in college. Today, at 64, Gallegos seems untouched by cynicism or anger. He's warm and driven, relaxed while talking to student organizers, sure while negotiating with powerful entities. One of those was the world's sixth largest company, [Chevron](#), which CBE prevented from building a precedent-setting refinery in hardscrabble [Richmond](#) in the Bay Area.

"Usually, the companies are surprised that we can't be bought off," he says. "But ... the first issue of our community is public health. The second thing is, we really know our stuff. We really are informed. And the third thing is that we're not crazy. We understand the art of compromise."

Halting Chevron's plan was one of several significant victories. Banning flares was another. The CBE team has stopped the equivalent of more than 139 million tons of greenhouse gas emissions in California, and thousands of everyday citizens have joined the organization. Its results make CBE more important to life in Southern California than, say, [Walt Disney Concert Hall](#) or "the point" for surfers at [Malibu](#).

"Global warming won't let anyone off the hook," Gallegos says. "We say, 'When folks in Vernon are fighting for themselves, they're fighting for all of us.'"

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