



How Can I Help?

Josue Cruz

Vieques, Puerto Rico • Texas • USA

When Josue woke up, he was excited for the first time in a long time. His friend, Carmianne, had invited him to join her for a Youth Leadership Summit on their little island of Vieques, Puerto Rico. At first Josue was concerned he'd have to take a week off from his job at the local pizza shop. At 14 years old, this young man felt responsible for helping his family, who were barely surviving on welfare and food stamps.

Times were tough. When the U.S. Navy arrived 68 years ago, they had suppressed the island's economy: they told everyone to either leave or sign up for government aid. For three generations, people weren't able to even have a job. Now that the Navy had finally left, everyone was hopeful for a better future. Ever since Josue could remember, he'd heard the bombs exploding, testing the worst weapons for wars in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq. People tried to stop them with peaceful protests and civil disobedience, even putting their bodies on the runway so planes couldn't refuel. Over and over again they were arrested. Sometimes celebrities, like Edward James Olmos, joined them, to get the media's attention. The famous actor had even been the Mayor's cellmate in jail.

Vieques Mayor invited the Stone Soup Leadership Institute to help train the island's youth for a better future. On the first day of the Institute's Summit, Josue watched the beloved actor share a video message to Vieques youth.

You've been chosen to be here as part of the Youth Leadership Summit. This is much needed not only in Vieques, and Puerto Rico but on the entire planet. You are the hope of the future. The future depends on all of you sitting listening to me today. I wish I could be with you there, and inspire you, as you would inspire me. Really, we belong together. Thank you for being here today to become the leaders we need you to be. God bless you and thank you all.

Josue arrived early to the Summit, eager to check things out. When he saw the Institute's organizers setting up, he asked, "How can I help?" Josue was honored to be asked to hang a poster of his heroes: Gandhi, Dr. King, Cesar Chavez, and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. Thus, began Josue's life-changing journey: it would end up transforming his life, and many other lives too.

To begin the Summit, Native American Nane Alejandrez from Barrios Unidos in California led the youth in ceremonial chanting at the ancient site where a medicine man's 4,000-year-old bones had just been discovered. He asked for prayers for the young people to have the courage to lead their island to a better future for all their people.

"*What is your dream for your life, for your island, and for the world?*" For the first time, Josue was being encouraged to dream big. "My dream for my life is to become a lawyer," he said, determined. "For my island: to be the Mayor. For my world: Peace." Josue was passionate about giving young people the opportunity to better their lives. Every day he could see how Americans were coming to invest in his island - buying real estate, starting restaurants and setting up B&Bs and hotels. Tourism was booming. More than anything Josue wanted his people to reap the benefits of their hard-won victory and earn a good living to provide for their families.

For the next four years, Josue worked tirelessly to cofound the Vieques Youth Leadership Initiative. He was impressed that rock star Tito Auger continued to keep his promise to help Vieques. During the years of peaceful protests, Tito's "Song of Vieques" had been their anthem. Vieques youth were excited that Tito traveled from San Juan to Vieques to work with the Institute's team to develop the Cultural Arts & Entrepreneurship Initiative. They created a logo, a theme

song, and a photographic display of their faces with their dreams. Everyone was so proud to see it hanging in the Vieques Airport so those who visited would see them as Vieques's future leaders. During weekly workshops, Taino artisans trained youth to make hand-crafted jewelry, climb trees to collect calabash, and carve indigenous designs for unique lampshades. On the weekends, they set up a table on the Malecon and sold their wares to tourists. They practiced their English and developed math and money management skills. One winter they raised over \$4,000.

More than anything, Josue knew that if his people were to succeed in this new economy, they needed to learn English. To protest the Navy occupation, teachers had refused to teach their students English. So now there were three generations of families who spoke only Spanish. Vieques was very isolated from Puerto Rico and the world. There was only one wi-fi hotspot on the whole island. With just a few computers, the paying tourists got first dibs. But lucky for Josue, Island Computers was right across the street from his home. The owner was kind and offered to help. With the Institute's support, they applied for a Microsoft grant for the first computer training on the island. First, Josue had to make his case to justify the request. From piles of papers stacked on the floors of government offices, he collected statistics to develop the report, "The Challenges Facing Vieques Youth." When the grant was received, this 16-year-old was the program's first trainer. Josue felt a deep sense of pride training his people to learn computer skills and explore the power of the World Wide Web.

Vieques had a long way to go to catch up. Josue was on a quest, searching for ideas, eager to discover best practices from other island communities. As the youngest person at the Caribbean Media Exchange conference in San Juan, he met San Juan's top meteorologist. She was surprised to meet such an inquisitive young man asking serious questions about climate change and how it might affect his island. Josue was fascinated by her presentation, with scientific facts and a declaration from 70 prominent scientists calling for a moratorium on building on Puerto Rico's fragile coastline.

Later that year, when it rained 24 inches in 24 hours Josue remembered the meteorologist's message. He realized then that he needed to find ways to help his people prepare for natural disasters. He set up one of the first Facebook groups to map where families, especially the elderly, lived. He wanted to be sure they weren't forgotten if - and when - future disasters hit again. Little did he know how prophetic this would be when in 2017 Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico. Vieques was at the eye of that storm.

Josue continued his travels, next to Los Angeles. At the next Youth Leadership Summit on Vieques, he had met the grandson and namesake of the great Latino leader, Cesar Chavez. He'd read about his leadership for the farmworkers in California. Josue was happy to translate for Cesar and bring his inspiring message of hope to Vieques youth. So, when Cesar invited Josue to visit him in Los Angeles, he jumped at the chance. Within a few short months, he visited Cesar Chavez burial place, La Paz and his Radio Campesino, where he was a featured guest speaker. Cesar taught Josue how to create a website to share VYLI's message with the world. Upon his return, Josue created his own radio show, where he featured local experts to share their vision for Vieques' future.

Everyone on Vieques longed to see the world. So, when Josue returned from Los Angeles, he was famous. When asked for his advice, Josue would always encourage young people to stay in school, get good grades, and make something of their lives. He humbled himself by sharing that once he was a C-D student and now he had a 4.0.

Next Josue led his people on a mission to ask the government to help. Josue boarded a plane with 42 youth and parents from Vieques to fly to San Juan. Dressed in their VYLI T-shirts, everyone stood proudly in front of La Fortaleza, the Governor's mansion, with their friend Tito Auger. Inside Josue gave an impassioned speech demanding action from government officials. From that moment on, everyone knew this young man was destined for greatness.

Next Josue traveled with the Mayor's Economic Development team to Tortola to study how the small business model in the British Virgin Islands supported local companies instead of investing in the economic trap of the supermalls in San Juan. Since Josue was now fluent in English, he was asked to make the presentation on behalf of the Mayor to the BVI Prime Minister. The Prime Minister was so impressed he asked the Institute to bring the VYLI model to his country to inspire BVI's youth. Josue's friends from the Cultural Arts & Entrepreneurship Initiative joined him at the Caribbean Artisan Festival. As the youngest artisan/entrepreneurs to showcase their wares, they were fascinated by the eco-foresters from Trinidad and Tobago who grew trees and harvested the seeds to make exquisite jewelry. From the \$4,000 they earned during the winter, they paid for their trip.

Josue continued his mission as an ambassador for Vieques youth, joining Vieques Mayor to meet with Puerto Rico's First Lady, then speaking at events in New York City and Washington D.C. On May 1, year, Boston's first Puerto Rican City Councilman, Felix Arroyo, hosted an event celebrating the anniversary of Vieques's freedom from the U.S. Navy. Josue had become an impressive orator. When he received the Institute's first Walter Cronkite Award, he said, "Walter Cronkite is an icon of the highest standard of democracy and equality. Being the Walter Cronkite award winner, was a door opening experience for me. I feel a responsibility to carry on the legacy of a man who represents responsible and human journalism."

Soon Josue was featured in prominent publications like *Caribbean Business* and the *Vineyard Gazette*. People started asking Josue to be the Mayor of their island. He reminded them that he first needed to finish his education and realize his dream of becoming a lawyer. For now, he was proud to be a 4.0 college student a full scholarship. As a law student, he was the only one from a family on welfare. At his graduation he received the prestigious honor for his contribution to the people of Vieques.

Then in 2010 Josue traveled to Martha's Vineyard to serve on the faculty of the Institute's 6th Summit. There he met youth leaders from other Caribbean islands of Bahamas, Jamaica, Barbados and from the newly formed Virgin Gorda Youth Leadership Initiative. For his presentation on Vieques he shared his dreams for his island community. Josue loved visiting the Vineyard, which is the same shape and size as Vieques. He especially enjoyed learning about innovative projects he saw on the Sustainability Tours. When he visited the school's gardens and heard Noli Taylor's presentation on the Island Grown Schools Initiative, a light went on. "If they can feed their people - with just a five-month growing season, just imagine what we could do in Puerto Rico!" he exclaimed.

Upon his return, Josue embarked on his action plan. He researched and wrote a grant to get federal funds for school gardens. He even worked with the opposing political party to get both sides to work for the good of their people. Josue is proud of the 100 school gardens they built, especially the one for handicapped students who now have a path towards self-sufficiency, selling their produce at the Farmer's Market. Unfortunately, Josue also learned about the underbelly of politics. When the press conference was held and awards were presented, Josue wasn't invited to the stage. While he was the one who did all the hard work, the credit went to those from the other party. Nonetheless, Josue was proud of his accomplishments. The second year the grant doubled, as did the number of school gardens. In his heart, he knew his people had the tools to feed themselves and become self-sufficient; that was reward enough.

Josue's next journey led him to Hawaii - 7,000 miles from his home. On the Big Island, he swam with the dolphins, witnessed the active volcano, and reveled in the snowcapped mountains of Mauna Lea. On the Institute's Sustainability Tours he learned about renewable energy projects like Hawaii Pacific Academy's Energy Lab. At the Waimea Elementary School garden, Josue shared his experiences in Puerto Rico and learned new tips for organic gardening. His favorite memory is of spending an afternoon with Nancy Redfeather in her luscious gardens. Nancy was Noli Taylor's mentor when she first studied school gardens. Nancy was touched that her mentee had inspired Josue to follow in her footsteps. In return, Josue was happy to share his connections so Nancy could receive grants to support Hawaii's State School Garden Initiative.

After Josue's classmates passed the Bar, they took high paying jobs and climbed career ladders that guaranteed them a comfortable life. With his newly minted law degree, Josue decided to first help his people get titles to their land. People had lost their land when the Navy confiscated and razed their homes to build new ones for its officers. Josue was Vieques first lawyer who could now represent them. It was a long, arduous process. Gathering all the legal documents to prove their ownership, then representing his people at the government's offices in San Juan was challenging. Josue spent many days there pleading their cases. For him it was just the right thing to do.

Josue then traveled to Texas to join his friend Carmianne, who invited him to join a law firm. For a while, he tried it out, but didn't like what he saw there. He was furious that Spanish speaking people were being robbed by some of the lawyers, who promised to get them U.S. citizenship. So, he explored other options before deciding to create his own firm. He put out a shingle and used social media to post videos showing how he was an honest person with integrity. People started coming. Word got out. People who had lived, worked, and paid taxes in the U.S. for 10, 20, or more years were being deported. Josue was outraged. While he had never liked going to court during his law school days, he now felt a passion to help these people.

Then the Border Wall fiasco began. People from Central America affected by U.S. wars and climate change were desperate. Josue saw it as his moral duty to help families who were losing all their rights, and being treated like animals, just for trying to give their children a better future. So today, Josue's days are long. He doesn't get to travel much or see his beloved island of Vieques. But he has peace of mind knowing that he's doing the right thing by helping people who desperately need his help.

Now 29 years old, Josue is proud to see his friends, VYLI alumni who are now successful doctors, lawyers, and business executives. He loves seeing all the young people he mentored at the Institute's Summits who are pursuing their dreams. The work he started goes on! To Josue, this is life's greatest reward.

*As you discover what strength you can draw from your community in this world
from which it stands apart, look outward as well as inward.*

Build bridges instead of walls.

Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor

Call to Action: Urge your congresspeople to vote for urgent funds to rebuild Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria. Support Josue's social justice and legal practice: @abogadojcruez; www.josuecruzabogado.com

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