



Youth Inspired by Knowledge

## Moving with resolve, leading with impact: POP Youth Mentor takes leadership to remarkable heights

*By Philo Magdalene | January 2020*



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One grounded solution that is universally agreed upon by activists and reformers who combat the teeming problems of today that haunt every corner of the earth, is the championing of youth leadership. Empowering youth and trusting them to lead has come to be viewed as the ideal road ahead as the world ventures to evolve a new narrative of development which is sensitive to protecting the global commons and the earth's ecosystems. What remains to be seen, however, is how many institutions from public and private space, and civil society will emerge from their conservative attitudes of trust, allowing young minds to take the lead and orchestrate the way forward.

The POP Movement, like many other youth-led organizations across the globe resolutely believes in the spirit of youth leadership. Fostering this belief in reality, the environmental organization offers a myriad of opportunities and motivates youth to utilize and grow through every available platform while they lead to combat the threats of climate change. Among the many young leaders it has recognized, mentored and strengthened, there is one individual who truly exemplifies what the POP Movement has set out to achieve in its mission to stimulate 'youth inspired by knowledge' to address the problem of climate change. A student of Pharmaceutical Chemistry and Biology, 24-year-old **Vanessa Hernández** is a **POP Youth Mentor** and leader, driving and promoting environmental activities in the North American country of México.

### **POP Youth Mentor and the POP Team in CUCEI**

Vanessa's role as POP Youth Mentor has been multifarious as she takes on several responsibilities related to leadership, coordination and peer motivation. Like many POP Leaders, Vanessa was introduced to the POP Movement through **Dr. Ash Pachauri**, **POP Senior Mentor** in a conference in Nuevo Vallarta in 2018, following which Vanessa took the lead to organize a similar conference in her university, the University Center of Exact Science and Engineering (CUCEI) in Guadalajara, inviting **Dr. Ash Pachauri** and **Dr. Norma Patricia Muñoz**, **POP Honorary Distinguished Mentor** to conduct a workshop. Apart from establishing a POP Team in CUCEI, this conference in October 22, 2018 witnessed the beginning of Vanessa's journey with the POP Movement.

Vanessa finds this event 'epic' as it was the first time, something of this sort was organized and spearheaded by students with support from professors and the administration of the university. The POP Team in CUCEI which emerged from this event went on to promote initiatives on waste management and reforestation, with student coordinators Miroslava Muñoz, Luis Fernando Bautista and Miriam organizing three consecutive recollection initiatives in the course of three months. The first one, in November 2018, invited students to donate plastic waste and this activity was followed by an industrial visit, where 20 students visited a plastic waste recycling company named "Lidretep" to observe and understand the recycling process. The second activity, in May 2019, was also a plastic recollection activity. Aside from the usual routine of plastic recollection and the subsequent visit to the industry where the materials were donated, the CUCEI team introduced new dynamics to enable students' commitment towards safeguarding the environment. There was a poster with the POP logo on which around 40 students imprinted their painted hands pledging their commitment towards action. In addition to this, an art challenge was organized wherein students were given 5 minutes each to present the current environmental

situation through art. The artwork of around 40 students was displayed for the professors to judge and 10 of the paintings were chosen with the winner receiving a scientific calculator. The third re-collection that happened in the same month focussed on retrieving waste paper and collected around 500 kilograms of paper. Students part of the initiative visited “Copamex”, a paper recycling company.

Even while the university supports these initiatives, the team is unable to engage in bigger projects that involve long-term benefits like bringing in a system of separation of trash in the university, due to logistical and administrative difficulties. Unfettered by these foreseeable shortcomings, the team planned to address the lack of healthy environmental culture in the campus by targeting the other side, which is, the student community. The regular re-collection drives have been part of their attempt to instill a sense of consciousness on the amount of waste they produce. “I do think that re-collection makes the person more conscious about the problems we have related to the environment. The main idea is to tell them that the solution is not recycling, but to stop using as they see the large number of kilograms of plastic that are being collected,” says Vanessa.

### **Vertical garden - Creating a healthy environmental culture in CUCEI**

In addition to this, Vanessa coordinated with the team during the months June, July and August of 2019 to create a vertical garden in the campus as part of their reforestation initiative. Having carried out this project successfully with the help of directors in the university and around 30 students, Vanessa notes that the garden now stands in an excellent condition as a beautiful spot for students to rest and destress while it improves the air quality, lowers the ambient temperature, and reduces the noise pollution. She considers this to be a testament to what students can achieve in coordination with their authorities with regard to small climate actions as projects that benefit both the university community and the environment. “A leader is someone who gives other people the opportunity to develop their skills and it makes me really happy to see how the students are able to coordinate with each other to achieve this project,” she says.

The POP core team in CUCEI consists of 10 students from different career streams who coordinate with the administration and endeavor to make the students more conscious and responsive regarding matters concerning the environment. Addressing the factor of time constraint, students are given incentives in the form of certificates for their engagement. The team aims to reach out to more and more students in the university through social media and also through the amplification of their initiatives. Moving forward with this goal, they submitted around 10 projects of environmental innovation for the International Conference and Festival on Climate Action, representing the University of Guadalajara.

### **To motivate, guide and do so much more...**

As mentioned before, Vanessa’s involvement with the POP Movement moves much broader than the scope of environmental projects implemented in the University of Guadalajara. At the outset, her role is to guide and motivate students towards engaging in climate activities with a strong sense of environmental consciousness. By introducing young people to the POP Movement, she helps them identify a platform where they can develop their idea and convert them into reality. Moreover, she gives presentations in various youth-related events in México talking about the POP Movement and the work it promotes. “I tell them about the events we are going to have, explain to them that if they have any ideas about helping the planet, everything is possible; that

they need to work with the administration and authorities, and that they need to be perseverant to develop a project,” she says.

Vanessa played an integral part in the huge success of [the International Conference and Festival for Youth-Led Climate Action](#) in Nuevo Vallarta on August 19 and 20, 2019 as she coordinated the execution of the event at many levels. She developed online registration platforms for participants and volunteers; networked with students, universities and institutions across the world in order to invite participation and raise funds for the students who needed assistance; supported in the search of event sponsorships; oversaw logistics and project evaluation; supported the comptroller in collecting payments, requesting invoices and receipts; provided social media support and sent emails promoting the event; supported in branding and marketing; developed the agenda and other other required documents in both Spanish and English; translated details of the event from Spanish to English for documentation purposes; the list only goes on.

Listing these activities, the youth coordinator says, “In all these activities, the POP Movement gave me the opportunity to demonstrate the abilities of perseverance, leadership, entrepreneurship, team work, cooperation, adaptation, and analytical and numerical ability.” Vanessa’s all-encompassing leadership and coordination commands deep admiration as she pursues on loving everything she does and every experience she has in the POP Movement and considering it to be a platform that develops her personal and professional self.

### **Mastering the art of being a student as well as a mentor**

However much one may love and enjoy what one does, juggling between work and full-time higher education does not come easy to anybody. The manner in which Vanessa not only manages, but also smoothly masters this, speaks volumes about the kind of self-discipline that she has evolved in herself. Maintaining two separate agendas for college and work, she records everything in a notebook. She chuckles when she admits, “I make a schedule allotting each activity for one or two hours. I also write things like ‘I am going to eat between 3 and 4’. I know it’s weird, but sometimes when I have a lot of things to do, I do my schedule and try to prioritize what is important.” For all the effort she takes to efficiently exert herself, Vanessa is not alone in her journey. She receives tremendous support from her teachers who understand the multiple responsibilities she carries and work with her schedule accordingly. More importantly, she is constantly supported, guided and motivated by the POP Senior Mentor, Dr. Ash Pachauri.

### **Growing in leadership**

Having closely worked together with Vanessa for almost 2 years, there is no person better suited than the POP Senior Mentor who can give a fine account of how she has grown and evolved with the POP Movement. Dr. Ash Pachauri says, >I have seen Vanessa grow from a driven young person into a self-assured and confident leader who drives action on the ground and inspires young people all over the world!”

### **Evolving values and perceptions in the mission forward**

Vanessa’s values and perceptions define and guide her approach towards mobilizing and motivating young people to Protect Our Planet. Discouraging the notion of fast results, she believes in the might of perseverance, patience and integrity, and considers them to be the key to achieving any results. She urges the youth around the world to not wait for someone else to come and motivate, but instead motivate oneself. Arguing that we as humans need to take responsibility

for the distress humanity has been causing the environment, Vanessa says that the problem majorly rests on humans not taking any responsibility or exhibiting a sense of commitment, and instead placing the blame and responsibility on someone else. She feels that in order for the world to move forward and tackle global crisis, people must let go of this mentality and be conscious of the long-term negative impacts they as individuals have on the environment.

As Vanessa takes these ideals forward in her journey to lead more youth around the world, she will no doubt bring the change that she hopes to see.