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Thursday, July 28, 2011

## Environmental injustice fight yields awards



Sergio Castillo, 18, center, shoots a video of Patricia Feraud, left, and Jairo Reyes Vega, 15, all of Worcester, as they unload compost at the Hartshorn Avenue home of Zoila Cornejo in Worcester on June 30. (T&G Staff/PAUL KAPTEYN)

By Amanda Roberge CORRESPONDENT

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**WORCESTER** — For a summer job that he entered into somewhat blindly, Sergio Castillo of Worcester is on the receiving end of some very high acclaim.

At the age of 16, Mr. Castillo became involved with Toxic Soil Busters, a youth-led collaborative offered through the Worcester Roots Project, dedicated to testing the soil surrounding Worcester homes to detect lead, heavy metals and hydrocarbons, and to implement landscaping plans to protect residents' environmental health.

Now two years later, he is reaping the fruits of his labor — in the form of numerous filmmaking awards.

"I wanted to do something to help my community first," he said of his desire to become involved with Toxic Soil Busters, an opportunity he pursued directly after seeing Al Gore's "An Inconvenient Truth." At his interview, he was asked if he would be willing to participate in the creation of a short film about the project — something the Worcester Roots Project had been awarded the funds to execute, thanks to the Beyond Green Project out of New York City.

"I had no experience making films," he said, though he ultimately became the project's chief editor. "I had no idea what I was getting into."

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The job came naturally. After winning first place in the National EPA "Faces of the Grassroots: Environmental Justice Video Contest," the 7-minute documentary, "A Worcester EJ Story," has garnered two more awards — one at the International Kids First! Film Festival, the world's largest youth film festival, and the Premio Corazon award at the San Diego Latino Film Festival for Best Youth-Produced Film.

Toxic Soil Busters provides an opportunity for Worcester youth to make a difference in the lives of others, as they target low-income neighborhoods throughout the city, which have some of the highest levels of soil pollution and the largest number of lead-paint contaminated dwellings in the nation.

"It's about fighting environmental injustice," said Mr. Castillo, who attends Worcester State University. Through the film, Mr. Castillo has played a major role in reaching millions of people with the group's message about soil pollution and its impact on people and communities.

By adding mulched playgrounds, patios and raised beds to contaminated areas surrounding many Worcester homes, the group has had a huge impact on the health of residents.

"(The group) can really do wonders," said Averil Hamilton, who had a hand in the making of the documentary, from editing and writing to some of the soundtrack work. "There is so much to be gained."

Founded in 2001 and incorporated in 2003, the Worcester Roots Project came into existence when a group of Main South residents grew concerned over high levels of lead in their soil. Toxic Soil Busters was formed as a youth-developed and initiated program in 2005, when two teenagers and a founding member of the Worcester Roots Project had the idea to bring the issue of lead soil contamination together with the need for meaningful youth employment in the city.

Teens involved in the program have gained the respect of community members, as well as city officials, and are seen as experts in lead soil decontamination.

"I think that the film did a lot for Toxic Soil Busters," said Ms. Hamilton. "It really tells who we are and what we do."

Mr. Castillo said he is proud of the work he has done — not only with the film but also as a hands-on Toxic Soil Buster.

"It always feels good when you see smiles on the faces of children knowing that their yard is safe from lead and that you helped," said Mr. Castillo.

Even as some Toxic Soil Busters graduate and move on to other careers, they regard the experience with the group as one of huge value.

"It's more than just a summer job," said Ms. Hamilton. "It's an opportunity to do something with your life."

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