

# OAKLAND POWER PROJECTS #1: THE ANTI-POLICING HEALTH WORKER COHORT

## AN INTERVIEW WITH RUBEN LEAL

*The Oakland Power Projects (OPP) are an initiative of Critical Resistance to engage Oakland residents in building community power and wellbeing without relying on cops. In developing OPP, we interviewed many community members who have found ways to reduce reliance and contact with law enforcement. CR is working to amplify these alternative practices. In this interview, CR cofounder Rachel Herzing speaks with Ruben Leal, a community medic and organizer, about skills and best practices to deal with emergency situations.*

**Rachel Herzing: Could you tell us a bit about what happened the evening when you helped out the little [boy] in your neighborhood? Could you tell me what led up to that and what you did?**

Ruben Leal: I was at my friend's house hooking up a sandwich, we were making tortas, and I heard gun shots a block away from here. They were really close by. I look out the window to see what was going on and all I see is some guy with a suit and a tie running with his briefcase, and I was like "oh wow!" Then I heard the cry, you know that cry like the mother when something has happened to her kid. Once I heard that I knew something went down on that corner, so I just ran over there. I took my backpack because I got a little first aid kit, with gloves and gauze and stuff.

The first thing I saw was the mom hysterical and the kid bleeding from his neck. So the first thing I thought was that he got shot in the neck, so I just put on my gloves and I tried to take him to a house; to some steps. While I was taking him the owner—my neighbor who I've known for years— was telling me not to bring him to his steps. I was like "what do you mean don't bring him here? Man, he's a little kid." So I just did what I was trained to do; I checked his air way to make sure he was breathing; he was talking and stuff. I went through the ABC's; that's airway, check the air way, make sure he was breathing, check his circulation. All that was good because he was talking, so then I checked his cuts where I thought he was shot, but it was only superficial cuts from the glass. I guess the bullet hit the window and then it shattered and the flying glass was what cut him. I did a small head to toe evaluation to check if he was shot anywhere else, and he was good. Right after that I was just relieved too, because I knew he was gonna be alright. Then I told the mom that he was gonna be alright; he just got cut. After that I was just trying to keep him calm. He kept crying and screaming that it hurts. I was just talking with him, keeping him calm with another guy that came out.

When the paramedics arrived, I told them my little report of what happened; I told them that he had a cut, that I did a head to toe evaluation on him, and that he was alright. Then they went and did their evaluation on him. After that I left because the cops started showing up and they were asking questions; I didn't see what happened, so I just left. I felt like what I had done was done. I was just glad that nothing serious happened too.

**RH: Where did you get trained to know how to do that?**

RL: I did an outdoor education program that Tony Marks-Block [a Critical Resistance member] hooked me up with. They taught me how to do basic first aid on people. It was actually a wilderness training and they actually trained us how to be trained to deal with anything, that could happen out in the back country. It's basically the same training that EMT would get out here [in Oakland], the only difference is that when you're out in the back country you could be hours away from help if you get injured. So it's actually kind of harder because you have to treat the patients for a longer time than an EMT out here in the streets. You know, EMT's just seal them and take them straight to the hospital and out there in the wilderness help could be hours away.

**RH: Can you talk a little bit about why you think it's important for people in the neighborhoods to get that kind of training to know how to do that kind of work?**

RL: Yeah, I think it's really important because the response time for an ambulance out here, especially in the Fruitvale district, is a long time. In 2009 I got shot right across the street from where this incident happened and my sister, instead of calling 911 on her phone, actually called my dad cause his number actually started with 919 and he works in Alameda. He actually got here before the ambulance got here. Out here you really can't depend on the ambulance to try to save people you know. I think everybody should at least know at least basics.

That night I got shot, I told my friend to put pressure on my wound, because I was bleeding profusely and that's basically what saved my life. I had a numeral thorax and a collapsed lung, so I was bleeding out a lot. But he was putting pressure on it, and that's what probably saved it. Just knowing those basic things, the two most important things out there to know—to put pressure on a wound if somebody gets shot or stabbed, and the Heimlich maneuver if somebody is choking. A lot of people don't know what to do if someone is choking. So if somebody is choking and they're coughing, that's a good thing; that means that they are trying to dislodge whatever is obstructing the windpipe. But once they stop coughing then that means that whatever foreign object that is stuck there is completely lodged in; that's when you can do the Heimlich maneuver, which is very easy. You just find their belly button and then you go behind them and just push really hard thrusting in a J motion up. There's enough air in the body—this is what my instructor told me—that it will dislodge anything stuck in there, about 70 miles per hour worth of pressure is in your lungs that could dislodge anything. Even if you are choking on your own and there's nobody to do the Heimlich maneuver for you, you could try to do it to yourself on a chair or something. You throw yourself on there, which is probably not very fun, but it could save your life. My mother, one time she was choking at the house (she has dentures and when she doesn't put them on it's just harder for her to chew). She was eating some food and it got stuck and we didn't know what to do. This was before my training; we called 911, and I told them my mom was choking. But my brother-in-law actually came behind her and did the Heimlich maneuver for her. According to the paramedics that came 15 minutes later, he basically saved her life.

**RH: It's ironic to me that the City of Oakland has been trying to paint you—someone who helps people out and would jump out of the house and try to find out what's wrong—as the “worst-of-the-worst-of-the-worst” in the neighborhood. The City has put this gang injunction campaign against the 40 of you that you are a menace to the neighborhoods, that we should be afraid of you, that y'all are the worst of the worst. When at the same time that you, Mikey, Javier and others have been steady doing stuff in the community, putting murals up. We're here in the Fruitvale Community Garden that you and Mikey really helped begin. Can you comment on that at all?**

RL: Yeah, it is ironic because the incident with the little boy happened in the injunction zone. I'm not even supposed to be out there. If I see anyone in trouble, now that I have this training, I'll hop out the car and help out. I always wanted to help people out, you know. There have been incidents where people have been shot and a lot of people don't know what to do. They just stand around and just look around. That's one of the reasons why I was just so juiced to get this training. I don't know what to say about the City and how they portray us. I just know that if I see somebody hurt or somebody that needs my help, I'm gonna help them. I'm not gonna just drive past them and not do anything.

**RH: What kind of resources would you want to see in the neighborhood? Would you want to see everybody be able to be trained up like you are?**

RL: I would want to see everybody at least be able to do basic medical support: if somebody's choking or if somebody gets shot, if somebody's having problems with diabetes, low blood sugar. That would be dope if the City could even put out some money, we could start doing workshops or something. It would be cool to lace up the community with all that, and I know there's people already doing that, like the People's Community Medics. They do workshops, and I've been trying to connect with them for a while. I heard they do a lot of good work.

There's an article that came out about how here in the Alameda County or Oakland gun shots weren't even a priority for the ambulances. If there was other cases that were higher priority then they would be on those calls. So it's just like we can't really depend on ambulance services. If we were to depend on that, I would probably not even be here anymore. The response time is a joke sometimes; if something was wrong with me, I would much rather somebody just drive me. Highland is 5 minutes away and the average response time for the ambulance is about 15 to 20 minutes.

**RH: Anything else you would like to add?**

RL: Some people try to say I'm a hero but I'm no hero; I was just there at the right time. I would still do it if it happened again. I heard some gun shots the other day and I passed by to see if anybody was hurt. Luckily, nobody was hurt, but yeah I'd help. As for the training that I got, they don't know if they are going to have funding for the next cohort. It's called Outdoor Educators Institute and it was privately funded by I think a foundation for youth investment in San Francisco. But people could look that up; it's a great opportunity for urban youth to get trained in the outdoor fields, they train you with the wilderness first responder course also, which is something like a \$900 course for free.