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# Youth Ambassadors



## Commit to Health: Youth Ambassadors

The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) is working with the Target Corporation to support children's health and wellness through the Commit to Health: Youth Ambassadors initiative. NRPA was awarded funding as part of Target's ongoing youth wellness efforts to inspire local agencies to engage youth as community health and wellness leaders and implement the HEPA standards at their local park and recreation sites. In 2017, NRPA will expand these efforts and work with agencies in Atlanta, Dallas, Houston and Miami.

## Best Practices Guide

NRPA awarded 3 communities with funding in 2016 to pilot this youth-driven approach to increase access to healthy eating and physical activity. The Chicago Park District, Mesa Parks, Recreation and Community Facilities and Houston Parks and Recreation piloted Youth Ambassador programs in 2016, engaging youth as health and wellness leaders in their communities and collecting best practices to be replicated across the field. Explore their successes, challenges and recommendations for engaging youth and creating sustainable health-focused ambassador programs in the new *Youth as Health and Wellness Leaders in Local Parks and Recreation: Best Practices Guide*.

## Download The Best Practices Guide

# Meet the Commit to Health Youth Ambassadors

Luis Cruz, Youth Ambassador, Houston Parks and Recreation Department



### Why did you decide to become a Youth Ambassador?

I was born and raised in the east end of Houston, Texas. Many of us knew someone who struggled with diabetes or weight issues and many knew very little about nutrition. In high school, my friends and I created an initiative to promote health and wellness through Zumba Fitness, along with a creative way to promote environmental literacy. We portray costumes and character spirits of U.S. Forest Service Woodsy Owl, promoting Woodsy's conservation messages such as his four Rs: reduce, reuse, recycle, and rot. In addition, the U.S. Forest Service engaged bubble bee Frankie Bee, promoting pollinator conservation. The guardians also consist of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

characters promoting refugee system efforts and messages through Puddles, the blue goose, and Arnie, the Attwater Prairie Chicken. Through this unique programming, memorial interactions of integrated messages of conservation transcend to fitness, theater and dance, connecting people with people and people with nature through physical engagement and interpretation.

### Why do you believe health and wellness is something we need to educate our communities about?

It is important to educate our communities of health and wellness, but mostly important able to "engage" people with actual solutions. For example, by incorporating Zumba Fitness, we have been able to provide a positive safe environment for diverse sets of people to take part. Through our journey we have been able to see the positive energy in engaging in recreation and fitness throughout the city of Houston. We have also been showcased on national platforms in Colorado and Washington D.C.

### What is your favorite healthy food?

I love food in general, especially green smoothies! I will say as of right now, my favorite healthy food is probably a quinoa salad made with, corn, cherry tomatoes, beans, onion, cilantro, lemon, and avocado. I love the taste of fresh produce and makes my stomach very happy! It also gives the fuel to keep up Zumba!

## What is your favorite physical activity?

My favorite physical activity would definitely have to be Zumba Fitness, I became Zumba certified and started teaching Zumba Fitness classes after my friends and I were concerned for our families health and wanted to put an end to this cycle of illness. Our goal is to reach out to other youth to let them know what is going on, why is it happening and what we can do to regain our health. As a collective, our team offers Zumba Fitness during an amazing program offered during the school day called, "Genius Hour," a pilot program that allows students to choose an enrichment class of their passion. At first, we were instructing 10 students, then slowly added up to 100 students! Not only are we passing this message at a high school level but now we are bringing it to younger viewers in community centers all around Houston, Texas as part of the Houston Parks and Recreation Department Youth Ambassador Program.

## What do you want to do when you grow up?

I am currently attending Houston Community College taking my basics and will transfer to the University of Houston to study Graphic Design and Environmental Studies. I graduated from Furr High School, and serve as a community partner empowering high school students to tackle our community's health through engagement programming such as Zumba Fitness. Our goal, is to expand our mission throughout the entire city of Houston, spreading messages of health and wellness, bringing people together to celebrate each other and the outdoors.

[Read about two other youth ambassadors in the June 2017 issue of \*Parks & Recreation\* magazine.](#)

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