



Nare Park

# Remaking Urban Immigrant Communities

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**F**or five years, Nare Park worked for the [Healthy Neighborhood Market Network](#), hosted by the [Los Angeles Food Policy Council](#). The fresh, nutritious food program is designed to unite communities and build the leadership role of immigrant store owners in low-income areas. Park supported store owners to develop food action plans, access resources, and broker local partnerships. In 2016, the Korean-American Park, a University of California, Los Angeles, graduate, was recognized as a [Global Food Initiative “30 Under 30”](#) for her efforts. In January 2018, Park, who identifies as gender non-binary, began working with [API Forward Movement](#), a nonprofit that addresses the health needs of Asian and Pacific Islanders.



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**I**n her role at both the [API Forward Movement](#) and the [Healthy Neighborhood Market Network](#), Nare Park is all about building relationships and ensuring cultural relevancy, language accessibility, and cross-cultural connection in underserved, largely immigrant LA neighborhoods.

For instance, at the [Healthy Neighborhood Market Network](#) (HNMN), a project of the non-profit Los Angeles Food Policy Council, Park helped owners transform dingy, convenience-filled corner stores into healthy neighborhood hubs. These neighborhood market owners now operate as successful and sustainable healthy food retailers in communities referred to as food deserts or food swamps, where liquor and fast-food stores flourish and nutritious food is scarce. The residents of such impoverished areas, often people of color, are more likely to experience obesity and other diet-related chronic health conditions.

Through training and technical assistance courtesy of HNMN, these mostly family-run shops add more fresh fruits and vegetables to their shelves and find creative ways to market this merchandise to increase sales. Sometimes all it takes is improved refrigeration units, better lighting, updated signage, or more attractive staging to get customers to pay attention to the produce, says Park.

For five years, Park worked with store owners on their visions for healthier businesses, be it a modest market makeover or a complete store overhaul. When Park began working at LAFPC in 2012, the program's clients were mostly Korean-speaking store owners in South Central LA. Some had seen their stores destroyed or seriously damaged during the 1992 civil unrest in the city, which magnified already existing racial tensions in the area.

“Resistance to change can come from feeling resentful or scapegoated, an expectation from community residents that store owners should do better,” Park says. “Sometimes all it takes is speaking with respect and gratitude and showing how even a small investment can make things better.”

A Korean speaker, Park worked hard to develop relationships with store owners built on mutual trust and a spirit of collaboration. “These relationships are more than store transformations for improved food retail environments,” Park says. “I support community-serving immigrant small business owners to step into leadership roles within the neighborhoods they serve, and for Korean, black, and brown store owners and customers alike to understand their fates are linked together. This work goes beyond the transactional, even as we recognize that businesses want to make a profit.”

Park helped more than 30 stores with sourcing equipment and store infrastructure, hosting events and cooking demos, improving interior design and external façades, locating farmers and vendors, researching products, and navigating the permitting process—all the minutiae of store operations—including the additional paperwork that accompanies selling perishables. “It was a learn-on-the-job kind of experience,” says Park, 30 “Every day was different. Every store owner and every store is different. It kept me on my toes.” Obstacles standing in the way of success include access to capital, sourcing infrastructure, and cultural and language barriers.

Now, Park is using her skill set and community connections in her role as part of the Healthy Eating and Active Living (HEAL) team at API Forward Movement. Her job includes community outreach, translation services, developing curriculum, and co-facilitating culturally rooted cooking and gardening workshops. “This kind of hands-on, grassroots, culturally responsive work really resonates with me,” Park says. “And it’s vital if we want to bring about systemic change in our food systems.”

“This work goes beyond delivering fresh fruit and vegetables. It’s about community healing and rebuilding neighborhoods in a positive direction together with the help of partners,” says Park. “It’s also about creating conditions for a life of dignity.”

Park was raised in the San Gabriel Valley by immigrant parents: a seamstress mother and pastor father, who presided over a small, conservative Christian church congregation, which was the focus of family life. The youngest of five and the only child not born in Korea, Park identifies as gender nonconforming. Park was eager to move to the city and joined the collective Soobak, an anti-racist and anti-imperialist political and social movement with Korean roots.

In 2016, Park transitioned from the biblical name Esther to the Korean name Nare, which means “to take wing.” “This gesture of shedding my name is so I can be seen, heard, and whole,” Park says. “It is rooted in strength, resilience, and a progressive value system. So many food spaces are affluent, privileged, and white. There’s a certain measure of safety and uplift knowing it’s okay to be radical.”

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As Park was about to move away to college, Park’s mom took over a sister’s backyard, which was both prolific and wild. “She gained new life and purpose in interacting with plants and soil and growing food, in a spiritual way. That left a strong impression on me,” says Park.

A trip to Korea in the fall of 2017 via the [Korean Education Exposure Program](#) also had a profound impact on Park and the direction she wants to take in future food systems work. “I want to put my body where my values are, close to land sovereignty work,” Park says. “At the systems level, when you talk about food equity, you’re also talking about transforming a landscape.”—Sarah Henry