

## **Maritza Rocha succeeds Barbara Waller as Executive Director of Cool Learning Experience**

The Board and staff of the Cool Learning Experience (CLE) are excited to announce that Maritza Rocha will succeed Barbara Waller as Executive Director, starting October 1.

Maritza comes to CLE from the Little Red Schoolhouse where she managed an impressive visitor and interpretive center – part of the Cook County Forest Preserve Districts. That included all operations and programs of the Nature Center, animals, and the trail management of 500 acres protected forest land. Among other achievements she helped bring about the Nature Center's designation as the World's Largest Urban Night Sky Place.

During that time she also served as Guest Instructor, Applied Ecological Management Practicum at DePaul and UIC Universities of Chicago.

For the prior five years she was the Director of Youth Services for Mujeres Latinas en Acción in Chicago. There she launched after-school apprenticeship programs, paid internships for youth underserved, scholarships, and pathways to careers in STEAM fields.

Maritza has the background and skills to build on the strong foundation that Barbara and the team have laid, and to augment the reach and impact of CLE.

Maritza received her BA in Sociology of Law & Society and an MA degree in Sustainable Urban Development from DePaul University. She has deep professional training and experience working with children and minority groups in community development and environmental education, experiences that will serve her well at CLE.

In her own words, "For me, working with Cool Learning Experience is embarking on a thrilling journey where the intersection of social justice, nature, academics, and the great outdoors ignite my passion. As ED of CLE I will have the privilege of guiding and empowering young minds to envision their own possibilities and shape their futures."

The CLE children's summer program and other out-of-school events have received many accolades from parents, children, past participants, visitors and funders. CLE's curriculum quality is high and the children served love the program and thrive on it.

The CLE Board and staff and the community at large are grateful for Barbara's incredible work growing the program over 16 years and she will stay involved with CLE as Founder Emerita. Her knowledge and history with the organization and her continuing commitment to the students, their families and the community at large is highly valued and will be a powerful complement to Maritza's leadership.

Maritza is poised to expand the program and the number of children reached. The Board and staff invite the community to support her in that journey.



**Maritza Rocha**  
**Executive Director**  
**Cool Learning Experience**

Maritza Rocha's life journey has been one of resilience, dedication, and a deep-rooted commitment to her community and the environment. Born and raised in Chicago, IL, Maritza's upbringing was strongly influenced by her mother, a hard-working immigrant from Michoacán, Mexico. Growing up as a first-generation American in a close-knit, large family, she learned early on the value of connection and commitment.

Maritza's childhood was characterized by a deep love for nature and the outdoors. She spent her formative years gardening, camping, hiking, fishing, and listening to cherished family stories around crackling fire pits. These experiences fostered a profound appreciation for the natural world and a desire to protect it.

Her higher education pursuits included a bachelor's degree in Sociology of Law & Society and a Master's degree in Sustainable Urban Development at DePaul University. Her studies concentrated on cultural and land preservation, health disparities, and the importance of green spaces within communities of color.

One of Maritza's most significant career achievements was her role as the first Latina Nature Center Director of the Little Red Schoolhouse in the Forest Preserves of Cook County. Here she oversaw 500 acres of enclosed forest lands and managed all operational needs in the interpretive nature center. She introduced culturally, spiritually, and nature-based curricula to a diverse audience, actively participated in various committees, and assisted in placing the Nature Center as the World's Largest Urban Night Sky Place. Maritza holds numerous certifications in conservation and eco-conservation.

With over a decade of experience in urban settings, Maritza has specialized in youth development, community engagement and outreach. She has launched after-school apprenticeship programs for youth under-resourced, providing pathways to careers in STEAM fields. Maritza has also played a crucial role in developing informative curricula for Latinx youth, nurturing the next generation of leaders.

Maritza is a leader in the Latinx community. She graduated from the Multicultural Leadership Academy of the Latino Policy Forum and worked at Mujeres Latinas en Acción. She is Joven Noble and Escalera Certified, a Latinos Outdoor Chicago Chapter Leader, and on the Board of Directors for the Environmentalists of Color Networks. Maritza is also a published writer.

In her leisure time, Maritza enjoys writing, gardening, spending quality time with family and friends, trail running, bug watching, hiking, and traveling.

Her unwavering commitment to preserving nature, empowering youth, and fostering inclusivity in all her endeavors makes Maritza a remarkable force for positive change.