

A Refugee No Longer in Flight

**VIEN TRUONG, THE
NEW CEO OF THE
VAN JONES-FOUNDED
DREAM CORPS, DIGS
IN FOR A FIGHT.**

*Story by Joanne Furio
Photograph by Derek Varra*

IF YOU WANT TO SEE VIEN TRUONG get angry, ask her about lead in paint chips.

“My kids play in the playground, in the dirt, and then put [contaminated soil] in their mouths,” says Truong, a longtime activist and resident of Oakland’s Fruitvale neighborhood, where inhabitants have more lead in their blood than the residents of Flint, Michigan. The mother of four-year-old twins, Truong was recently named the CEO of Dream Corps, the nonprofit founded by another well-known environmental fighter, Van Jones. “They’re also at a risk because of a lack of investment in this community,” she continues, “a failed school system, increased job insecurity, and increasing levels of desperation, which lead to increasing levels of crime and violence.” Because of all these problems, she says, people who live in Fruitvale are expected to live eight years less than those in Walnut Creek. “My work my whole life has been to change that.”

So far, she’s succeeding. A lawyer with expertise in economic development and green energy, Truong was recognized by President Obama’s White House last year for her work on climate equity. Over the past decade, she has helped develop, pass, and implement more than 20 state policies in California and elsewhere, moving billions of dollars on behalf of those most vulnerable to poverty and pollution. “In Oakland, it’s essentially unanimous: She’s a legend,” says state assemblymember Rob Bonta of Oakland. “Folks know the genuine article when they see it, and she’s it.”

Jones, the outspoken author, CNN commentator, and Dream Corps president, tapped Truong in July to head the social justice nonprofit he cofounded in 2014. Dream Corps works on initiatives aimed at cutting the prison population, getting people from disadvantaged communities

into tech, and moving \$1 trillion from polluters’ pockets into low-income neighborhoods. Pie in the sky? Perhaps, but Truong has already done similar work in California.

In 2012, she co-led a coalition that helped pass a first-of-its-kind carbon-pricing law that charges the state’s biggest polluters and uses that money to pump \$1 billion into the state’s poorest communities, including Fruitvale. In the Bay Area, \$430 million in funding led to 97 projects that together are expected to reduce greenhouse gases by almost five million metric tons. In East Oakland, such funds were used to create hundreds of affordable housing units, provide free bus passes and public transit days, and plant thousands of trees. “Vien’s tenacious,” says Alvaro S. Sanchez, the environmental equity director at the Greenlining Institute in Berkeley, an advocacy organization. Sanchez worked on implementing the law under Truong. “She’s incredibly charismatic and has a great, compelling story to tell.”

Indeed, Truong’s devotion to struggling families is personal. One of 11 siblings, Truong was born in a Hong Kong refugee camp after her parents fled war-torn Viet-

nam. They picked strawberries in pesticide-laced fields in Oregon and labored in sweatshops in Oakland. Without access to good jobs, the family was forced to live in cramped apartments in polluted communities where schools looked like jails. “Passing policies felt magical,” she says. “I thought, there are things you can do to change the rules in which people operate—all of this injustice—just by learning the language?”

Truong’s next battle: fighting Senator Lindsey Graham’s carbon tax bill that proposes funneling money back to corporations as tax cuts. Truong would rather use that money to do for the entire country what she helped do in California. “I know how to do it because I have already done it once,” she says.

Trying to create such change under an administration hell-bent on dismantling 40-plus years of environmental law will be tough. Truong, however, remains undaunted. Since the presidential election, she sees the work of nonprofits like hers as more relevant than ever. “Who is going to fight for families who are struggling, the mom in Flint or the mom in Oakland?” she asks. “It’s us.” ■