News
EarthBeat




Roberta Zolkoski welcomes visitors to the Earth Day Community Resources Fair at St. Teresa of Kolkata parish, St. Catherine of Siena church, in Pittsburgh. About 200 people attended the April 27 event, which featured about 20 tables for vendors. (Theresa Doerfler)



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On an overcast spring day in southwestern Pittsburgh, close to 200 people gathered in the church hall at St. Catherine of Siena for an Earth Day Community Resources Fair. The atmosphere was festive, as vendors from climate-focused businesses and groups shared information and resources — as well as a classic Pittsburgh cookie table that included flower-shaped cookies in line with the day's theme.

Stella Smetanka Mericli, a retired lawyer who calls herself the "convener" of the area's Care for Creation group, says that caring leadership at St. Teresa of Kolkata parish — a pastor, parochial vicar and deacons who all focus on social justice — provides a "fertile environment" for responding to the climate crisis as a faith community and enabling a gathering like this one, the only one of its kind in the Diocese of Pittsburgh.

St. Teresa of Kolkata serves a growing Latino population in Pittsburgh, offering weekly Spanish-language Masses and Portuguese Masses every two weeks. The parish, formed in 2019 during a diocesan consolidation process, has three church buildings in Pittsburgh's Brookline and Beechview neighborhoods, including St. Catherine of Siena.

Fr. Jim Bachner, pastor, gave a recent Earth Day homily relating the history of Pittsburgh's steel and iron works to Pope Francis' call to action in *Laudato Si*'.

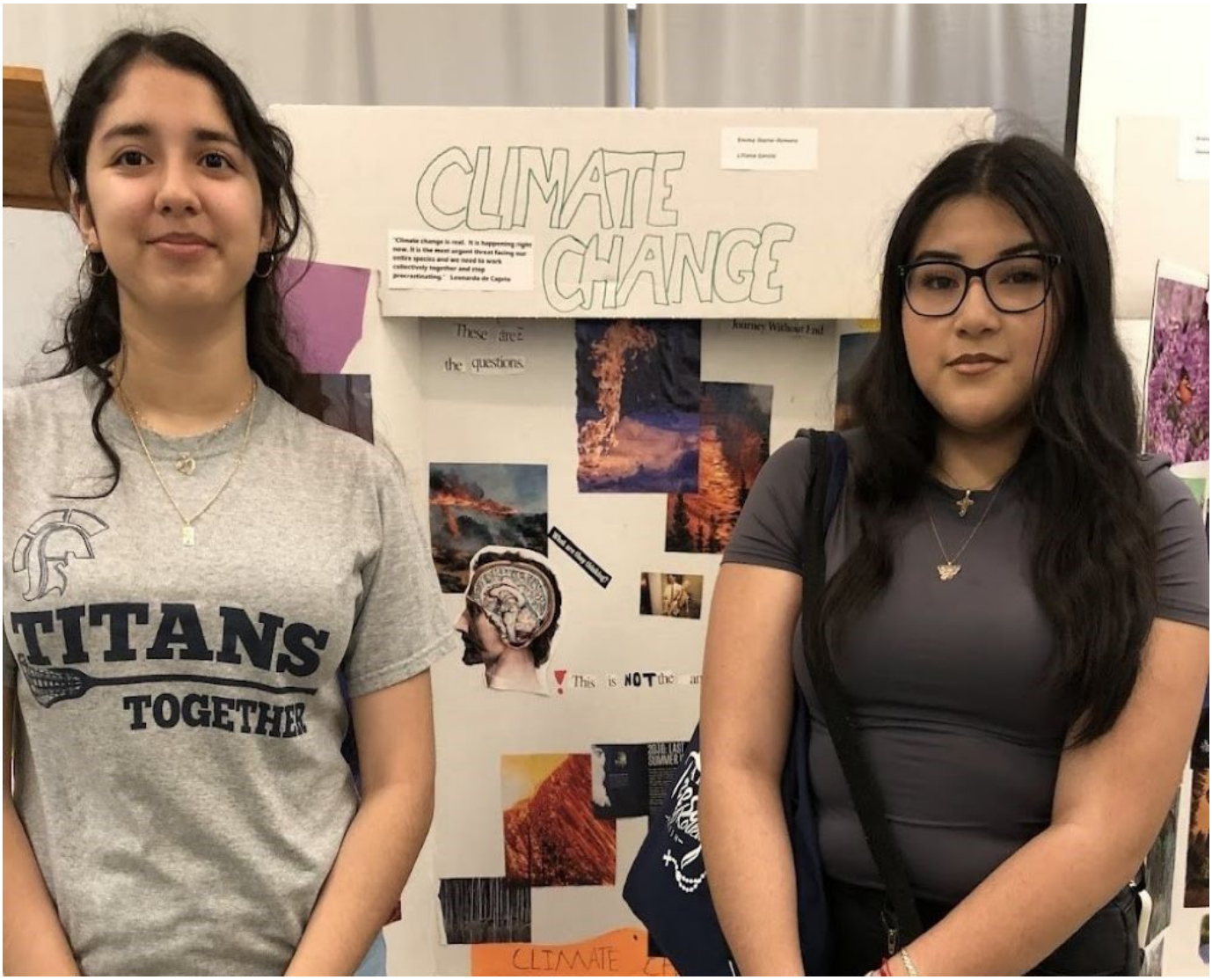
Known for over a century as the "city of smoke," Pittsburgh experienced a thick haze of industrial pollution that blocked the sun and caused evening darkness even during daylight hours. After World War II, determined efforts to transform the city resulted in a renaissance.

"Our city is beautiful now," said Bachner, "because people believed that change was possible."

He sees Pittsburgh's story of transformation as a lesson in hopefulness. We can transform the future, he insists, even amidst our current environmental crisis, by

thinking about how we treat the creation that God gave us.

Chris Peta and his partner Joe Zuback, who lives in the Diocese of Los Angeles, founded Laudato Sol, a nonprofit dedicated to solar energy as a tool for evangelization. During the community fair, Peta cheerfully worked the room, talking about how focusing on climate issues can bring young people back to the church.




Dulce Lozano-Rea and Liliana Garcia, participants in the Casa San Jose teen program, stand with their posters at the Earth Day Community Resources Fair at St. Teresa of Kolkata Parish in Pittsburgh April 27. (Theresa Doerfler)

Peta advises parishes and dioceses on energy issues, putting faith formation ahead of facilities and finances in hopes of re-invigorating young people in a faith-based approach to the climate crisis. Peta called St. Teresa of Kolkata parish "an amazing

community" because of its dedication to outreach and social justice, adding that Mericli and Bachner have both "vision and courage."

A few months ago, the Care for Creation group invited Peta to give a talk. Bachner stopped by the presentation, and now the parish is set to be the first in the diocese to get solar panels on their buildings. They expect the panels, which will be installed at the St. Catherine of Siena church site, to pay for themselves in eight years.

When the Care for Creation group started planning this Earth Day event, they first conceived it as an "energy fair" to educate parishioners about small changes they could make to become wiser users of resources. They invited representatives from local utilities — gas, electric, and water — along with four solar panel companies to set up tables.

The concept grew, and the April 27 gathering featured more than 20 tables for vendors, including: the Area Agency on Aging, the local branch of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, the Phipps Conservatory Youth Climate Action Committee, the Sierra Club and representatives from garden groups in nearby neighborhoods Brookline and Beechview.

Someone came from 412 Food Rescue, a local nonprofit that partners with food retailers and volunteer drivers to connect surplus food with individuals and families experiencing food insecurity. More than one refill container business shared information and sample products, and Ten Thousand Villages set up a small shop with fair-trade crafts.

A Mexican food truck in the parking lot served tacos — and skipped the plastic forks in favor of bamboo utensils.

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A teen group from Casa San Jose, a Latino community center founded by the Sisters of St. Joseph, made posters to express their concerns about the environment. Liliana Garcia from Brashear High School and Dulce Lozano-Rea from Shaler Area High School said that they hoped people would see the displays and reflect about how climate change affects both physical and mental health.

But Garcia hopes that they will go beyond reflection. "We also need to actually do something," she says.

An artist, Lorenzo-Rea is intentional about her own use of paper and plastic. She said that we don't have to rely on municipal systems for recycling. "You can reuse plastics yourself," she says.

At a table near the doors, Roberta Zolkoski greeted visitors, making sure that everyone had a map of the vendors, a reusable bag and a chance to win a houseplant at one of the hourly drawings. She described herself as a "friend of the parish" who attended St. Teresa of Kolkata because "there is no other church around that's doing this."

With evangelistic zeal, she said that making climate a spiritual issue puts you into a right relationship with God and creation. "This is the issue that touches every human being," she said. "We have to choose this issue above all others. It's about justice."

Zolkoski handed out small packets of marigold seeds that she harvested herself and packaged in a recycled envelope. They are easy to grow in any soil, she said, and they keep pests down.

Plus, they're beautiful and they bring joy. It's a small gift, she said, "But we're the church, and we can do something!"