

CLEAN AIR COALITION

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If I could give young activists one piece of advice, it would be to become involved in movements, not just protests.

While politics and activism has always been a feature in my life due in large part to my mom's progressiveness, I think the first firm memory I have of activism was the mainstream news coverage of the Battle of Seattle in 1999 - images of black bloc anarchists smashing Starbucks windows, with only passing references to the devastating decisions made by the World Trade Organization that brought the 40,000 activists to Seattle to protest, or to the years of movement work that led up to the uprising.

I remember voicing my support for the uprising to family members, and being told that the activists were undermining their message by destroying property. Being only 13, I remember being unable to offer a defense to the activists - but I also recall not being convinced, and became very interested in general in progressive activism and advocacy movements. Within a few years, I would find myself staging a one-

person demonstration against our school district's racist mascot, joining tens of thousands of others in NYC to protest our government's push for an invasion of Iraq, and starting a school anti-hate club.

Unfortunately, none of these efforts immediately had an impact - the club disbanded, I graduated high school with the mascot emblazoned on decor, and our nation's violent militarism utterly devastated the Iraqi people in the subsequent war and occupation. I recall how disheartening these early efforts were, and how demobilizing that helplessness and hopelessness was - what was the point of standing in those cold protests, walking for miles, if it didn't stop our nation from committing such a heinous, indefensible and unjust crime as invading another nation?

With hindsight 20 years later... it is still disheartening and horrifying. However, a lesson I have since learned is that protests alone will never stop our opposition in their pursuit of fascism, authoritarianism, and extractive capitalism, just as hateful protests I

ike Charlottesville will never stop us from fighting for justice.

Activism is about so much more than flashy public demonstrations with leaders (sometimes self-appointed) shouting into bullhorns. International uprisings do not spring suddenly from the ether, but from years of quiet work to raise awareness of issues, from failed efforts at reform, and from societal cultural and political shifts that can take generations to reach. The passage of a change in the law may seem sudden, but in almost every instance, it's been workshopped and rewritten dozens of times over years. Activism is almost never West Wing Aaron Sorkin-style speeches in response to an injustice changing everyone's minds, or other cinematic movement moments. It's usually hard, long days spent building movements and developing strategies to address not only the immediate crisis but the underlying injustices that systemically lead to the problem.

This realization led me to my current role as an organizer for the Clean Air Coalition of Western New York. Clean Air started around 2005 when residents in the Town of Tonawanda and surrounding areas just to the north of the City of Buffalo began talking with each other about public health concerns, and organized to identify the industrial sources of their health conditions. This work

was in part inspired by similar grassroots organizing efforts in Niagara Falls a generation earlier in the Love Canal neighborhood, and that work in turn was built from prior decades of environmental justice movements.

Clean Air's philosophy is simple - to win environmental justice and public health campaigns, we must build power by developing grassroots leaders who organize their communities to run those campaigns. A campaign is never about one singular charismatic leader - it's about neighbors finding the leadership skills they each bring and utilizing those skills to work collectively towards a common goal.

Our campaigns start with residents who come to us with an issue they have already begun organizing about - sometimes all residents need is some direction about who to lodge a complaint with, or some strategy tips. For longer campaigns, we work with residents to identify strategy, missing skill sets, and to connect them with needed resources. Our longer campaigns have been re-invented several times over, with residents and organizers who have come and gone and shifts in the goals and outcomes sought - there may never be a big flashy "win" that closes our work out, as we're striving for a progressive vision that is always on the horizon.

We live in an honestly bleak moment of time - I don't believe there has ever been a period in my life where the possibility of outright civil war seemed so close. Climate change ravages communities, and a mix of authoritarian fascists and white supremacists are violently fighting to roll back political and social reforms that we've won not just over the past few years, but over the past several decades.

But I am inspired by the memory of those who have come before me in this work, by those whose company I share, and by the visions of younger generations of the future yet to come - even moreso, I feel driven by a sense of responsibility to those younger generations. We must maintain hope even in the face of the worst adversity, because if we do not, then we are writing off all their dreams and aspirations.

As we look ahead to the rough period we will likely be embroiled in, I am also reminded of all the progress we have made to date, and I feel confident that the backlash we see today are the dying throes of an unjust system - in the words of Ursula K. Le Guin, "We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable. So did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. Resistance and change often begin in art, and very often in our art, the art of words."

So, yes, sometimes activism can be an inspiring Sorkin-style speech before thousands at a demonstration that can shift things - but, even moreso, it's conversations we have with our neighbors and the strangers on the bus. It's developing friendships, trust, and learning to recognize each other's strengths over long lengths of time. It's joining groups that work on the issues that concern you, and pitching in on the long grinding work.

Sometimes, revolution doesn't look like smashing a Starbucks window, but instead like a spreadsheet of contacts to reach out to.

(PS! If you want to support or learn more about our work at Clean Air, please visit cacwny.org)