



Applied Hope: Building Resilient Communities

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New York City

Growing up, Ana Sophia Mifsud always felt split between two worlds, but what exactly those two worlds were wasn't quite so easy to figure out. As is the case in many modern families, Ana Sophia split her time between her parents' homes: her mother's home in Miami, and her father's in Guatemala. Her experiences in each place were very different: and often this led to inner turmoil.

Guatemala is rich in natural beauty and culture, and Ana Sophia spent her time there immersed in nature. On any given day, she could be found hiking active volcanoes, playing on black sand beaches, or splashing around in the many cascading tidal pools. There she developed a sense of wonder and adventure, as well as a love of being outside. But for all its natural splendor, Ana Sophia came to understand that Guatemala is a poor country. Poverty and economic inequity are persistent problems. And there are other challenges to consider - high rates of malnourishment, issues of indigenous and women's rights.

Her life in metropolitan Miami was very different: there she went to well-funded public schools, received a great education, and could spend time hanging out with friends without worrying about her safety. "I was conflicted about all these differences between my two homes," she says. It made her sad to realize that not everybody had the opportunities she had. One day, she decided that it was her mission to help more children have access to the educational and socioeconomic experiences she had. But she was still just a high school student herself, and she didn't know yet how she could do that.

As a budding environmentalist, she knew that Miami and Guatemala are both uniquely vulnerable to climate change. Situated as it is between two coastlines, Guatemala is geographically vulnerable. And its economy is dependent on agriculture, so it's also vulnerable to droughts and rains. Miami is also on the front lines of climate change. At high tide in Miami Beach, the streets are flooded, even without hurricanes.

When Ana Sophia was a freshman in high school, she enrolled in a class taught by Dr. Wafa Khalil, which was the only solar energy course taught in public school in the United States at the time. Here, her passion for environmentalism was nurtured. She learned about climate change and green energy. And as an aspiring engineer she was overjoyed to learn that innovative technologies could help impoverished areas improve economically, while also safeguarding the environment. This is when Ana Sophia's two worlds became one. "Once I realized I can care about the environment, and address the economic health of communities in need at the same time, I had a renewed sense of hope. I knew I'd found my calling."

So she set about learning everything she could about renewable energy technology. She attended local workshops given by NGOs and climate change organizations, and she even took a course on solar energy installation. "I even learned how to install a solar array on a rooftop," she says with a laugh. Even more impressive, she achieved her B.S. in Environmental Systems Engineering from Stanford University. "I always wanted to be an engineer, because to me, an engineer is a problem solver. I wanted to be a part of implementing the technology that could help people solve their local issues related to climate change, and inject some life into local economies. I just wanted to make peoples' lives better."

Ana Sophia always knew she wanted to work at a mission-driven organization that had the same positive, hopeful outlook she had, and the same focus on developing technical solutions to climate change that would also lift up communities economically. After college, she began working at the Rocky Mountain Institute (RMI), where she was

introduced to the concept of applied hope – a mantra which she had unwittingly been living, and aspiring toward all her life, well before she had heard of it. Amory Lovins, RMI’s co-founder, describes the concept of applied hope this way:

We work to make the world better, not from some airy theoretical hope, but in the pragmatic and grounded conviction that starting with hope and acting out of hope can cultivate a different kind of world worth being hopeful about, reinforcing itself in a virtuous spiral. Applied hope is not about some vague, far-off future, but is expressed and created moment by moment through our choices.

At RMI, Ana Sophia found her professional home, working on the front lines of climate change in the Island Energy Program. Her work was focused on the Caribbean Islands, including St. Lucia and Belize—until Hurricane Maria tore through the region in 2017. In the immediate aftermath of the hurricane she went to work in Puerto Rico, building microgrids in remote areas that had been devastated. Microgrids are technologies that work with existing energy grids, but continue working when the energy grid goes down—a commonplace occurrence in the remote mountainous regions of Puerto Rico, which became the norm after Hurricane Maria.

It’s estimated that Hurricane Maria caused Puerto Rico roughly \$91 billion in damages. Keeping the concept of applied hope in mind, Ana Sophia decided to bring the microgrid technology to those who needed it most – the children. In such a difficult time for the island, she knew she’d need help taking on such a big challenge. So she partnered with several organizations such as Save The Children, to install renewable microgrid infrastructure in schools, including the schools in mountainous communities, which were experiencing the longest outages. More than anything, she hoped her efforts would help return these island communities to some semblance of normalcy. By the project’s end, Ana Sophia had helped install microgrids in 10 public schools, giving more than 4,000 students and faculty access to clean, resilient power. “I can’t tell you what it was like when the students could see firsthand what is possible. This is what applied hope fosters, in its purest form,” she says, smiling.

As positive as she was, the situation was hard for Ana Sophia to handle at some points. “I went home and cried almost every night. I couldn’t believe that citizens of the United States had to go to school in the conditions that I was seeing. But I never lost hope. And that’s important to get across to the children.” She stresses the importance of tone in communicating with communities that are suffering. “Doomsday messaging doesn’t galvanize people. You can’t show up to a disaster area and say the sky is falling. It’s necessary to rally those in need to action, behind a message of positivity and hope—*applied* hope.”

Ana Sophia wants youth to understand that there are many ways to get involved with the climate change movement and help communities in need. “There’s not just one type of person that cares about tackling climate change. Everyone should.” She believes tackling this issue will, and must, happen across economic sectors, political parties, countries, and disciplines. “It’s going to impact every aspect of our lives. It’s important we take a whole-systems approach. Activism is great. But having all sorts of people engaged in solving this issue will give us the best chance in the future.”

She also believes in the importance of getting out into nature as the most effective way to help people gain reverence for the natural world. “To this day, I find a lot of joy and renewal when I get to spend time outdoors. So my advice to young people is simple: *Go outside!*”

Now, 25 years old, Ana Sophia’s latest goal at RMI is to try to get the 70 million homes and businesses across the U.S. that burn gas, oil, or propane in their buildings to eliminate combustion. It’s a project with huge emissions implications, and huge hurdles to overcome. Thankfully, Ana Sophia is the one who is tasked with achieving such a lofty goal. After all, she was able to deliver reliable electricity to 4,000 schoolchildren in the remote mountains of Puerto Rico.

As a problem solver at her core, there’s no doubt Ana Sophia will figure out a way to lead on any climate issue that arises – which is why youth should feel confident looking to her as a source of knowledge, experience, and inspiration. And of course, as she continues to abide by the tenets of applied hope in all the work she does, she will continue to lift up the underserved communities that she has always so diligently served.

*Infinite gratitude toward all things past;
infinite service to all things present;
infinite responsibility to all things future.*

Gôtô-roshi

A favorite quote of RMI's founder Amory Lovin

Call to Action: Learn more about green infrastructure, remote electrification, and green community education, and The Rocky Mountain Institute - <https://rmi.org>

Stone Soup Leadership Institute
www.stonesoupleadership.org
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