



We Are the Leaders of Today

Kevin J. Patel

Los Angeles, California

Kevin J. Patel was sitting in class one day, listening to his teacher, when suddenly he realized that something was wrong. At first his teacher didn't believe him—and he remembered that that morning he *had* drunk a lot of coffee, so maybe that was why he felt so strange. But it felt more serious than that—his heart was racing, and he could barely breathe. Finally, he went to see the school nurse, who immediately called an ambulance, and Kevin's parents. When he got to the hospital, his heart was beating at 200-300 beats per minute.

"I will remember that day for the rest of my life," Kevin says. "That one moment changed my life forever."

Kevin started researching. He was wondering why a healthy boy like himself, who was physically active, had regular check-ups, and had never had any prior health problems, would suddenly get such serious heart palpitations.

His health scare had serious consequences. For two years, he was in and out of the hospital. When they saw him, his schoolmates would ask him in a surprised tone if he had changed schools. "I knew that I was being affected by air pollution and smog, because my neighborhood is so heavily polluted," Kevin says. "What else would cause a heart issue like this?" he asks. And he adds, "A lot of other members of my community were getting heart issues as well."

Kevin lives in South Los Angeles, a community that he himself describes as marginalized. There are many issues in his neighborhood he says—homelessness, no access to healthy foods, and of course, air pollution. Already in middle school he had been advocating on the issue of food inequality. "Our community is essentially a food prison," he says. "We don't have access to good food, organic foods, like more affluent communities have."

As an Indian-Asian-American in a mostly African-American and Latin-X community, Kevin had always felt marginalized, within a marginalized population. In school, there were clubs and resources for other members of his community, but he was often the odd one out. So in ninth grade, when he returned to school after the incident with his heart, Kevin decided to start his own club, to deal with the issue that had affected him on such a personal level: he started an Environmental Club.

To his surprise, and delight, the club was a huge success—for the first meeting, more than 100 students showed up—they couldn't all fit into one classroom. Over the next four years, Kevin's Environmental Club tackled issues like reducing food waste, often combining their environmental work with other societal problems, to create synergies. For example, they installed bins at the school, to collect dry food items from students who would have otherwise thrown them into the trash, and donated the collected items to organizations working with the homeless.

They also got everyone to help with recycling: whenever someone on campus would find a bottle, they could throw them into the recycling bins put up by the Environmental Club: the club then used the money generated from recycling the bottles to donate to food banks.

"It was astonishing to see how much of a success we were," Kevin remembers. "It was a real change within our school. They're still continuing this project today."

Both as an environmental justice activist who had been interested in food issues from an early age, and then as an environmental justice activist after his heart problems began, Kevin feels he didn't have much of a choice.

"My activism is literally a survival tool," he says. "It's something I have to do, in order to make sure that my community has a voice."

Kevin knew about the facts of climate change for a long time: as a child he wanted to become a botanist, so he knew about the effect of global warming on plants. But because he is from a low-income neighborhood, he argues that his community is particularly affected by climate change.

"We are given little to no resources to combat these issues," he says. "We also have deadly fossil fuel infrastructure in our communities. Many affluent communities are not as affected by the climate crisis as marginalized communities like mine are."

Over the years, Kevin became a well-known activist. He has introduced motions in the Los Angeles County, and for some time he also worked with a number of nonprofit organizations, like Zero Hour, Ignition Green, and the Student Climate Emergency Coalition. Kevin has also given a lot of talks at protests and other climate action events. For some time he joined the Fridays For Future movement, and was trying to convince as many people as possible that it's high time to act.

"We really need to start taking action; this is not a time to wait around for change to happen through our government officials," he says. "It's really up to us to take up the mantle, and start taking action."

Kevin is also one of the UN ambassadors for the Together Band Initiative, which is fighting for the implementation of the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals. And it was right before the 2019 UN Climate Summit, during the worldwide Strike for the Climate, that a vague idea that Kevin had had before began to take concrete shape. He started One Up Action, an organization that provides climate activists from marginalized communities with support and resources, to help them uplift their ideas to address the climate crisis and make them a reality.

"I started working on One Up Action because I saw that young changemakers and activists don't have the resources they need to make their ideas become a reality," Kevin explains. "I really wanted to create an organization that can give funds to young changemakers, or help them by providing them with connections and opportunities or just help them with individual actions."

His organization started working in four different areas: they successfully set up a Youth Climate Commission in L.A. County; they started a Community Science Program, which supports local changemakers; they have started chapters of their organization in 32 countries around the world; and they introduced their action chapter program, to support activists on the ground in their initiatives.

"Young people are very, very smart," Kevin says. "We are not only the leaders of tomorrow. We are the leaders of today."

And, for him, that is what the first-ever Youth Climate Commission in the world is all about. It will connect 25 young changemakers in Los Angeles who act in the capacity of commissioners, and give their feedback and input on climate initiatives to the L.A County administration.

"Their feedback is key," Kevin says. "Whatever feedback the local government receives, they have to take it into account; they have to make the changes in order for their communities to be impacted in the right way."

For Kevin, this model is an efficient way for young people to have a voice in climate governance. One Up Action wants to introduce even more such commissions in the United States, and in cities across the world—that's why they are working closely with the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group—an association of 97 cities around the world that are dedicated to taking decisive climate action.

In Los Angeles, One Up Action has already been successful with their model of youth participation. “When it was time for all the supervisors to vote on this, they all voted yes. No one voted no on it,” Kevin remembers. “Then they announced that the Youth Climate Commission had passed unanimously, and the room just erupted. There was so much excitement!”

Kevin feels that his prior work as an activist was an important factor in his efforts to get the Youth Climate Commission started in L.A. The connections he had built, and having an already elevated status that gave his voice weight helped him organize the community and exert pressure. But it was never easy--and one of the most important lessons he learned, he says, is that you can never give up in the face of an obstacle.

“It’s an uphill battle,” he says. “But in the face of adversity, people need to step up. You should never be deterred from doing the work you love, or the work that you want to do.”

There's never been a ticking time bomb hanging over our heads.

You know, this isn't one war or one issue in one place. This is the future of the entire planet.

Jane Fonda

Call to Action: Make yourself heard about climate initiatives in your hometown. Join the discussion about what is being done on the issues that directly affect you. Get the support you need from One Up Action: oneupaction.org.

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www.stonesoupleadership.org
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