

4 Life-Changing Ideas from Young Heroes

By Marianne Larned

Young people have been at the forefront of social change across the globe and throughout history, especially today in the climate justice movement. It takes courage to face the prospect of a long future with eyes wide open — given projections for how much change the planet will see in a young person's lifetime. Here are four inspiring young people who are acting to reconcile humanity with nature and creating new business opportunities along the way.



SCYTHIA FILMS

Youth Unstoppable

Slater Jewell-Kemker / Canada

"I AM PASSING THE BATON TO YOU," said Jean-Michel Cousteau, as he handed 12-year-old Slater the delicate skeleton of a sea urchin. Slater had been invited to visit the island where the famous marine biologist and documentary filmmaker had started a children's camp for youth to learn about ocean sustainability.

It all started the year before when Slater wrote an essay for the MY HERO project. The assignment was to write about someone who inspired her. Not only did the famous oceanographic explorer answer her questions, he also invited Slater to visit the camp. "That was the first time I felt like someone who was very important took me seriously and wanted to listen to what I had to say," she says. "He was a big influence on me."

When she met him in person, she recorded a video interview with him. With a writer for

a father and a mother who was a film producer, Slater had always been in love with telling stories. She made her first film when she was only 6 years old.

Slater also loved watching movies. When she was 14 years old, she sat in her parents' living room and watched *An Inconvenient Truth*, a documentary made by Davis Guggenheim about global warming. It was eye-opening for her. "I remember about halfway into the film, I started crying and I didn't really stop for several hours," she says. "It scared the hell out of me. It wasn't something that I understood or knew how to fix, and the people who could fix it were not doing anything."

Slater felt betrayed. All her life, she had been told that she had opportunities in life, things that she could do and dreams she could realize. Suddenly, she started to question this. "None of it felt like it was real anymore because there was this big thing called climate change rising up in the middle of my life that made everything uncertain and unstable," Slater says. "And I wanted to do something. I wanted to

"TO BE TRULY RADICAL IS TO MAKE HOPE POSSIBLE, RATHER THAN DESPAIR CONVINCING."

— RAYMOND WILLIAMS,
WRITER AND ACADEMIC

be the person who had tried to do everything they could.”

In May 2008, when she was 15, Slater went to the Youth Environmental G8 Summit in Japan. For the first time, she got to meet young people from all over the world whose lives were being impacted by climate change — and they had all had enough. Slater brought her camera to the summit. There she made lifelong friends, and she started what would become a 12-year documentary film project. She decided she would tell the story of the environmental youth movement from within. The result was a documentary titled *Youth Unstoppable*.

After the summit in Japan, Slater traveled to several other climate conferences, in Copenhagen, Cancun, Paris, Poland, and Madrid, and she always brought her camera.

At the conferences, she would simply walk up to people and ask them questions. “At the beginning, I would have to say that a lot of it was adrenaline fueled by terror,” she says, laughing. But soon she realized that she was in a position of power: She had the ability to share these people’s



“I’VE HAD OLDER PEOPLE COME UP TO ME AND SAY THEY FEEL RE-INSPIRED BECAUSE OUR GENERATION ACTUALLY CARES AND IS DOING SOMETHING.”

— SLATER JEWELL-KEMKER

stories, and they needed their stories to be heard.

One thing that kept Slater going is the friendships she made along the way with other young climate activists. “It was a lot of fun,” she says. “You’re going up against something, and you feel like what

you’re doing is right. You feel this sense of camaraderie, being part of this community that has a purpose.”

Besides, giving up the fight against climate change had never been an option for Slater. “We all share this feeling that this is the most important thing we’ve ever come across,” she says. “It’s a mixture of perseverance and stubbornness, but it’s also the feeling that I am doing something that might actually matter. That it might affect other people and create positive change.”

In the end, Slater worked on *Youth Unstoppable* for 12 years. She shot over 500 hours of footage and spent 19 months editing. It was finally released in 2018 and has played in over 100 film festivals worldwide and garnered 13 awards to date. “I’ve had young people come up to me and say that for the first time, they felt like they were actually spoken to as human beings and not just spoken down to,” she says. “And I’ve had older people come up to me and say that they had lost all hope. And that they feel re-inspired that our generation actually cares and is doing something.”

YouthUnstoppable.com



Rise and Grind

Fergus Moore / **Scotland**

FERGUS MOORE HAD LONG DREAMED OF BECOMING AN ENTREPRENEUR.

His grandfather, a successful small business owner and venture capitalist, had instilled in him a desire to build something out of nothing. He saw from an early age that being a businessperson has its perks, like the ability to set your own hours and priorities. But it also gave him the ability to create things and see them take shape. He always knew he wanted to make something that would have an impact — whether that be on environmental, social, or economic issues.

He didn’t know it at the time, but his neighbor Scott Kennedy shared the same dream.

When the two young men were placed on the same team for a class entrepreneurship project, it turned out to be a fortunate pairing.

RISE AND GRIND



RISE AND GRIND

“WHAT HUMANS DO OVER THE NEXT 50 YEARS WILL DETERMINE THE FATE OF ALL LIFE ON THE PLANET.”

— DAVID ATTENBOROUGH, ENVIRONMENTALIST

In addition to their passion for entrepreneurship, the two shared a few other things. Both young men were working in coffee shops to pay for school. After making thousands of coffees — and throwing out filter after filter of spent grounds at the end of their shifts — they both started to realize something: Coffee grounds, like cups and straws, represented a major source of waste that the industry hadn't really taken into consideration. Each year, in the tiny country of Scotland alone, between 40,000 and 50,000 tons of coffee grounds are thrown away. Across the UK, it's half a million. Worldwide, that number is exponentially higher.

Most of the coffee grounds in the world end up in massive, smelly landfills where they emit methane — a major greenhouse gas contributing to nearly half of global warming. By 2050, as many as 3.4 billion tons of food waste will enter the global waste stream, and coffee grounds are a small but important part of this.

Fergus and Scott knew it didn't have to be that way. “We were seeing firsthand the amount of food waste going out in the trash at the end of every single shift, and it was something that didn't feel right to us,” Fergus says. “It felt like there was definitely more value there. It seemed to be something that people could use.”

And so, at the age of 23, they teamed up to try to develop a solution to all that coffee-ground waste. Overwhelmed with the scale of the issue, they began with some online research. They discovered many ways that used coffee grounds could be recycled: as fertilizer or compost, as a natural face scrub, even as insect repellent.

What started as a class project has now turned into a full-scale company called Revive Eco. After three years of work in the lab, Fergus and Scott are testing out their creation. They

weren't the only people who believed in the project. A quarter-million-euro grant from Zero Waste Scotland helped them develop the technology and test it in a lab before taking it to the real world — and they're still just 26.

Despite being a small startup, they're already speaking with some of the biggest players in the coffee industry. What if these companies got on board? What could they accomplish then?

In February 2020, they completed the prototype of an invention they had been testing — an industrial-sized machine that converts coffee grounds into environmentally friendly products.

Just as two young entrepreneurs in Scotland can play a role in tackling food waste, so too must an entire generation. And they won't just need help from the titans of the coffee industry, but also from other changemakers, and — perhaps most importantly — from consumers.

“Our generation seems to be far more interested in sustainability and leading a more impactful life, rather than simply making as much money as possible,” Fergus says. “I think change does have to come from a shift in mindset, and I would hope that our generation can be the one that can push people toward that direction.”

Revive-Eco.com



Disinvestment For a Sustainable Future

Alyssa Lee / USA

AS A FRESHMAN AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA-LOS ANGELES, ALYSSA LEE HAD AN EYE-OPENING EXPERIENCE. “What really woke me up was a speech by Van Jones on plastic pollution as a social justice issue. It was the first time I had ever heard the term environmental justice. It was the first time I had heard of environmental issues related to issues of class and race.”



GETTY IMAGES

Alyssa was eager to discover where plastic pollution came from, how it's disposed of, and where it's shipped and processed. What she learned was devastating. "It's all about the hidden costs, the 'sacrifice zones' of living the way we live, and who has to bear the brunt of that."

Alyssa began changing her habits. She started small by using less plastic, and one thing led to another. She and a few students started a food cooperative that focused on environmentally friendly products, as well as issues of labor justice. The more she understood American society's dominant institutions, the bigger the issues she began to focus on. "And what bigger issue does the environmental community face than fossil fuels?" she points out.

Digging into the research, Alyssa was shocked to discover that many universities across the country were investing in and profiting from the very fossil fuel companies that were causing environmental catastrophes. She just couldn't stand to see the negative impact of an influential institution such as hers on the next generation of young leaders. In 2013, she started the Fossil Free UCLA Divestment Campaign, and by 2020, it was announced that the investment portfolio for the entire University of California system — not just UCLA — was fossil free.

In 2015, Alyssa expanded the divestment movement by joining forces with the Better Future Project, where she started working as a divestment organizer. There she provided coaching and mentorships to hundreds of students in New England who were working to get their colleges to divest. But by 2018, the Better Future Project was at a crossroads: organizations like 350.org and the Divestment Student Network were no longer actively working on fossil fuel divestment. The Better Future Project was fighting the fight alone. So they decided to form Divest Ed to fill this crucial gap, and Alyssa moved into a new role as its director.

“FIRE MADE US HUMAN, FOSSIL FUELS MADE US MODERN, BUT NOW WE NEED A NEW FIRE THAT MAKES US SAFE, SECURE, HEALTHY, AND DURABLE.”

— AMORY LOVINS, CHIEF SCIENTIST,
ROCKY MOUNTAIN INSTITUTE

"We have an enormous opportunity as students to really shape our institutions to make a very powerful political statement about not just climate change, but specifically the fossil fuels industry," she says. "And divestment is one of the most powerful statements they can make."

The divestiture movement spread worldwide, and as of 2020, it was comprised of hundreds of institutions. About 1,200 of these institutions had \$14 trillion divested from the fossil fuel industry, including 60 colleges and universities; religious institutions like the Catholic Church in Greece; municipalities like the City of Denver; state pension funds in New York City; foundations such as the Rockefeller Foundation; and entire countries, like Norway, that have taken a stand for the environment and against fossil fuels by divesting.

"How we decide to live is a lifelong process," Alyssa says. "It's a constant, iterative, dynamic experience. It's never too early or too late to decide you want to fight for justice. At the center of this decision is the choice to make a connection against all odds. Connecting to those whose circumstances are completely different from yours, connecting to the earth's history and to its wisdoms and pains, and connecting to yourself. Making these connections is hard, emotional work. It requires rigor, self-interrogation, and living with constant uncertainty. But if you accept all this, fighting for justice, at its core, is about the capacity to build radical joy for yourself and for others."

Alyssa has a message of resilience especially for youth who want to get involved in remedying social justice, sustainability, and other environmental issues. "Being a good person and fighting against injustice is a constant battle. It's not always easy. But when you make a difference, it is all worth it. I wish I had learned earlier how to be okay with being uncomfortable and being uncertain, because some of the greatest personal gains I've made are when I've come out the other side of a difficult situation."

[Divested.BetterFutureProject.org](https://divested.betterfutureproject.org)

Eyewear With a Conscience

François van den Abeele / Spain



SEA2SEE

FRANÇOIS VAN DEN ABEELE'S IDEA FOR CLEANING UP PLASTIC IN THE OCEANS EMERGED OVER TIME. As a journalist, he'd covered social and environmental issues in over 130 countries in some of the world's most vulnerable regions, like Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East. From what he'd seen, the crisis of plastic pollution in the waterways was devastating impoverished communities, and the scale of the neglect was monumental. François was troubled and often thought about this problem — and about what could be done.

"You don't just get out of bed one day and say, 'I want to manufacture eyeglasses out of plastic waste,'" he says. "I started to wear glasses later in life, so by then, they were more on my mind." One day he thought, "Hey, glasses are something people all over the world wear. Frames are made of plastic. Then the gears began turning."

While François had no experience in fashion, he was a quick study. He discovered that fashion is a \$100 billion a year industry, and that it is among the most environmentally damaging, ranking only behind oil and gas in terms of its negative impact. His vision was ambitious, but it was not unrealistic. He'd worked with impact businesses before. "I soon realized that this was a way to create a sustainable product that was profitable and could help clean up the oceans."

In 2016, he put together a team, gathered up 20 kilos of recycled plastic, brought it to a processor in Italy, and made Sea2See's first run of products — 20 sunglasses. "It was a big idea and there were a lot of skeptics. Even my wife thought it was a crazy idea, using marine waste for frames. But there they were."

**"IN ORDER TO ATTAIN THE IMPOSSIBLE, ONE MUST ATTEMPT THE ABSURD."
— MIGUEL DE CERVANTES, AUTHOR**

The product was a hit almost immediately. To keep up with growing demand, François began working with fishermen in Spain to gather plastic. He then expanded his operation to France. Now he works with African fishing communities in Ghana, Senegal, and Togo, and he is hoping to expand to other African countries as well. Together they clean up polluted waterways while providing a much-needed revenue stream for these once-marginalized fishermen. "When I first went there, they thought I was crazy," he says. "They wondered why this guy was going to pay them for collecting waste." To his critics, François responded, "Waste has value. And cleaning it up has a value too— it benefits everyone."

Over time, François has leveraged the power of this new community of fishermen to address other regional problems. With the excess plastic that remains after the frame-making process, he launched a line of watches that supports the nonprofit organization Free the Slaves, to stop child exploitation in places like Lake Volta in Ghana where children are forced to work. "The sale of one watch finances two weeks of education for each kid that is saved. Our campaign is called Time for Time, because we all have time; and I believe we should give meaning to our time by giving back to the most vulnerable among us." And not all the waste collected by Sea2See goes into glasses or watches; they are also building a recycling plant to provide recycled plastic to various industries.

François believes that the future of all business is sustainable business, and this is where the youth can really lead the charge. "If you want to start any type of business, it should have an impact beyond whatever product or service you are offering. There are so many things you can do. I know it's tricky. It takes time. But if you have the resolve, you can do it. Try to have an impact. That's what I've tried to do. And if I can inspire people to try and have an impact in the same way, I've done my job. So, do it! Get involved. Sweat. Work. Bring your ideas to reality." ■

Sea2See.org



Marianne Larned is the founder of The Stone Soup Leadership Institute, a non-profit organization that invests and trains young people around the world to become leaders in their communities. These stories are from her latest book, *Stone Soup for a Sustainable World: Life-Changing Stories of Young Heroes*.
StoneSoupLeadership.org