



Changemaking from the Nation's Capital

Jerome Foster II

Washington D.C. USA

As an African-American child growing up near the nation's capital, Jerome Foster explored the forests surrounding his home in the D.C. suburbs. "I was the type of kid who could just be outdoors all day. I loved it," he says. "I couldn't wait to finish my schoolwork and chores so I could go out into the forest and explore the creeks and plains; and watch the animals with my parents and grandfather." Little did he know that one day he would become one of the youth leaders passionately helping to bridge the gaps between environmentalism and social issues in the national political landscape.

When Jerome first heard about climate change and global warming, he did what he did with any academic subject – he read everything he could. Once he had a strong base in science, he dug deep into how these issues impacted the cultural conversation. "Watching *an Inconvenient Truth*, I was blown away by the scale of the crisis," he says. "Then when I saw how many people *Avatar* drew to the theatres, I realized how people really cared about social justice. It was a huge number! However, they weren't being spoken up for in my circles."

When he was in middle school, Jerome started his first Facebook page: he wanted his peers to understand what climate change, global warming, and sustainability is all about. His habit of posting 4-5 times a day gained him a lot of followers. Seeing that he could raise such awareness by himself, he decided it was time he joined with others. "When I was in 8th grade, I jumped right in with The People's Climate March in D.C., as an intern," he says. "I helped organize climate marches, and made an immediate impact. It was so exciting; I even gave presentations at my school."

By the time Jerome was in high school, his bright, technical mind had been recognized. He was fascinated to learn about how tech could be used to revolutionize education and get young people more involved in social justice movements. "I always understood what BLM (Black Lives Matter), women's rights, and other mainstream social justice movements were about. But I never realized that these had anything to do with climate change. And when I did, I decided to do something about it."

Climate change and global warming impact women, minorities, marginalized peoples, and indigenous communities disproportionately compared to the rest of the population. In the African American community alone, 71 percent of the people live in areas where the air quality is unsafe, because of their proximity to industrial manufacturing, and other factors. One day, Jerome's teachers challenged him to use his technical abilities to highlight these issues by creating a business. They told him that World Series of Entrepreneurship (TWSOE) - was only five days away.

And so, at 14, Jerome founded TAU VR, a civics-based virtual reality company that promotes empathy and compassion. In TAU VR's 3D virtual space, people have a simulated experience of another person's experience. Jerome's model simulated the experience of a 5-year-old migrant child from Guatemala making the dramatic and difficult journey to Texas. "Parts of Central and South America are becoming uninhabitable due to climate change," Jerome says. "By vicariously experiencing a journey like this, it can give people a more sympathetic view of those who are suffering from our global environmental crisis. It can help the average person understand the many obstacles that my character is dealing with."

While TAU VR was a success, Jerome felt that he had much, much more to offer. Shortly thereafter, he had another jolt of inspiration. "I saw Leonardo DiCaprio's documentary *Before the Flood*. The whole film was amazing," he says. "At the end, he had a message that there aren't enough people covering climate change in a way that it should be covered

– especially young people. I realized that not only was he right, but I could actually be the one to try to remedy this problem.” And so, in 2017 Jerome created his next entrepreneurial venture in digital media: *The Climate Reporter*.

The Climate Reporter is a collection of international youth writing about climate change, global warming, environmental justice, and other sustainability issues around the world. The site contains a wide range of journalistic products, including op-eds, films, videos, podcasts, interviews, breaking news, stories from front-line communities, and an impressive range of cutting-edge digital content. The environmental news site receives roughly 600,000 views a month, and is among the top up and coming publications in the youth sustainability space.

The Climate Reporter’s excellent reporting got the attention of notable climate change youth leaders, like Greta Thunberg and her team. Then in 2019, Jerome organized the D.C. chapter of the worldwide youth School Strikes for Climate. To lend her star power and show her support for the Global Climate Strikes, Greta traveled for the very first time by sailboat from Europe to New York, and then went on to Washington D.C. Her presence at these strikes raised an enormous amount of awareness, and garnered overwhelming support for the movement. Other notable activists, celebrities, and entrepreneurs began joining in, inspired by Jerome’s infectious spirit, among them lifelong activist Jane Fonda, who stood beside Jerome.

Inspired by these courageous young leaders, Ms. Fonda launched her Fire Drill Fridays. Every Friday in November through February, hundreds of people, including Jerome, have joined with this famous actress to raise awareness about the climate emergency by protesting at the nation’s capital. Other celebrities have joined her too, using their star power to get media attention for the cause. As they increasingly engaged in very visible and strategic acts of civil disobedience, some of them, including Ms. Fonda, were arrested.

After each climate strike, Jerome has met with congressional staff at the U.S. Capital to talk about what they could be doing for climate justice. And the consistent pressure he was applying led to a life-changing opportunity for Jerome. He was invited to serve as an intern and be mentored by U.S. Representative John Lewis. Jerome was aware of how this legendary congressman had, as a 25-year-old, marched with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in Selma, Alabama and had helped to create SNCC (Student Nonviolent Organizing Committee), which played a key role in the Civil Rights movement. “To be able to learn from this true civil rights icon was amazing,” Jerome says. “It really made me rethink a lot of my prior assumptions about what is important—especially about giving back.”

With service and social responsibility in mind, Jerome founded OneMillionOfUS, a nonprofit voting advocacy organization that galvanizes the resources needed to facilitate an active voter turnout among youth. To help make the voting process easier and more affordable for youth, Jerome created partnerships with companies like Lyft, which provides discounted rides for youth to help them get to voting stations. Jerome has a lofty goal – he wants to get 1,000,000 youth voters registered in time for the 2020 election.

For youth who want to be involved in social justice, advocacy, and other cause-related work, Jerome’s message is simple: “Start with empathy and understanding,” he says, advice that applies to many diverse pathways. He believes that starting by educating oneself on issues you are passionate about is the key. “Read an article about it. Then read five more. Watch documentaries. Reach out to the people involved with the issues you are passionate about. Learn from them. And join the organizations that serve and support these causes.”

When it comes to solving problems, Jerome never has, and never intends to stick to one single issue – which is the exact kind of broad thinking we need more of this day and age. In our ever more connected world, more and more issues of social and environmental justice will continue to be interconnected. So, whether you are in Jerome’s backyard in Washington D.C., or a world away, take a step toward progress – toward a more just and equitable world for all.

*There may be some difficulties, some interruptions,
but as a nation and as a people, we are going to build a truly multiracial, democratic society that maybe can emerge as
a model for the rest of the world.*

U.S. Congressman John Lewis

Call To Action: Get informed on the latest global news on climate and sustainability, at Jerome's online hub, The Climate Reporter - <https://medium.com/the-climate-reporter>

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