



*Never Apologize for Dreaming Big*

**Daniela Fernandez**

**San Francisco**

From as early as she could remember, Daniela Fernandez was an animal lover. Growing up in the vibrant city of Quito, Ecuador, she was surrounded by marvels of nature on all sides. Ecuador is home to many rare and unique natural environments. This country on the equator contains everything from misty cloud forests to glowing, active volcanoes dotting the horizon.

Ecuador has the distinction of having the planet's greatest biodiversity per hectare. Among the rare animals found there is the spectacled bear, which exists only in a narrow ribbon of land in South America. There are also the many endangered species of the Galapagos Islands, such as the giant tortoise. Ecuador is also home to the world's largest flying bird, the Andean condor. All of these unique species drove Daniela to want to understand how to protect and preserve them and their environments, whether they be in the forests, grasslands, or the ocean.

"When I was young, my family used to take long trips from the city to the coastline. Growing up surrounded by nature really molded my life and my appreciation of the environment. I found that being around pristine nature in such a beautiful place is really necessary for happiness. I always had an innate feeling, even from the time I was very young, that these natural wonders had to be preserved."

When she was 7 years old, Daniela moved with her mother to Chicago, to an urban environment that couldn't have been more different from where she lived in Ecuador. "Landing in Chicago and looking out my window, it was flat land all around. As a kid, not seeing any mountains or nature around scared me. It made me appreciate what I had back home."

At age 12, she had a wake-up call. Walking home from school one day, she passed a shop window and saw something that would change her life. "I remember looking at this movie poster that had a penguin walking on sand - it turned out to be *An Inconvenient Truth*, Al Gore's documentary on climate change. So, I ran to the Blockbuster, because my favorite animal was a penguin and I wanted to understand why it was walking on sand. I got the movie, I was so excited... and the next thing you know, I'm in tears, learning about what could happen to our environment and to the penguins that I adore, the animals I love, and our entire climate. It was a catastrophe. But it opened my eyes to the reality."

After that Daniela dedicated her life to protecting our environment. She talked awareness, took environmental classes, and raised money to get solar panels for her high school. She even got involved with the debate team, with aspirations of running for office so she could influence environmental policy. And she enrolled at Georgetown University, which has strong connections with Washington's environmental political leaders.

As a freshman there, she had another life-changing experience when was invited to a meeting at the United Nations on the state of our oceans. "I was well versed in climate change, but this was the first time I'd heard any discussion about the role the ocean plays in the larger climate ecosystem. And I quickly realized I was the only young person in the room, learning about what's happening to our oceans. I also noticed a few things that the older people wouldn't. One was that there were not many communication channels. There was no livestream. And no social media getting this information out to my generation. I also realized that everybody was talking about problems, sharing these doomsday statistics; but no one was talking about solutions. No one had any hope about the innovations that could move things forward. I left that meeting feeling completely devastated because I had learned that our ocean was dying. And I also felt a sense of

urgency to let the world know, to let my own generation know, that this was something that we had to pay attention to, because no one was talking about it.”

On the train ride back to Washington after the meeting in New York, Daniela had a eureka moment. She realized that she could do a lot more as an entrepreneur than as a policymaker. With this thought in mind, she picked up a pen and pad. “I just started sketching out this model. It was literally two bubbles. In one bubble I wrote ‘young people.’ In the other bubble, I put the names of influential people, like various businessmen and high-level politicians. Then I put a concentric circle in the middle and thought, this is what the Sustainable Ocean Alliance (SOA) needs to be. A platform where young people can interact with high-level leaders so they can learn from them. But on the flip side, young people can also contribute to the solutions that these high-level people are looking for, that they’re not finding. That’s how the SOA was born.”

Back at Georgetown, she hosted the first ever Sustainable Ocean Summit, and 500 students from across the country attended. Daniela incorporated her forward-looking ideas into the agenda for the meeting, with the help of U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and the U.S. State Department. The meeting was streamed to all the U.S. embassies around the world: some even had Embassy watch parties, so young people from other countries could be involved.

“This was the catalyst that really kicked SOA into high gear. After that meeting, I had countless students from around the country asking me, How can I bring this back to my own university, country, city? So, I built a toolkit to help others replicate what I’d done. It made such an impact that after graduation, Georgetown gave me a two-month stipend to raise the funds to create this nonprofit.”

Daniela quickly became one of the leading youth activists in the sustainable oceans space. She moved her headquarters to San Francisco, for proximity to an innovative startup culture, and started building out various aspects of her organization.

“There’s a lot of innovation here,” she says. “Our Ocean Leadership program provides resources and mentorship for young, aspiring leaders to build hubs in their regions. We partner with high-level conferences, like the Our Ocean Conference. And recently, we’ve started the Ocean Solutions Accelerator Program, which was set up for entrepreneurs who have ideas, and need help learning how to scale.”

In the two years since its inception, SOA’s accelerator program has helped launch 29 ocean tech startups. SOA has even started a venture capital fund to further support these companies, and the many more that they expect will be created. SOA has made such a splash that it received support from Marc Benioff, the founder of Salesforce.com. This has helped support SOA’s newest venture, the Ocean Academy, a bridge program between SOA’s leadership and accelerator programs, to provide incubation and ideation support for more young people. “What makes this so unique is that the learning is done through our Ocean Learning Labs, which are virtual learning experiences,” Daniela explains. “The goal is to teach specific content for various learning skill sets, and about the professional industries and paths that are related to working in support of a sustainable ocean.”

Despite her many successes, Daniela has faced countless obstacles on her journey to becoming a youth leader in the ocean tech space. “I grew up as a first-generation student without a lot of money, in a single parent household. It was tough. Even when I was getting started with SOA, I got constant rejections from foundations. I faced a lot of naysaying. People tried to dissuade me from pursuing the path I was on. Thankfully, I had enough self-awareness to trust my own instincts and to believe in myself. And I had a good community of mentors. Most importantly my mom, who encouraged me to continue on this journey regardless of what other people said.”

For young people who have similarly grand aspirations, Daniela’s message is simple. “Never apologize for dreaming too big. That’s something I had to learn the hard way. I always felt like I had to hold myself back. But in hindsight, I’d tell the youth, ‘It’s up to **you**, what your vision is to become.’”

Youth empowerment is critically important to Daniela; but she feels like the current approach of some of their adult allies could use some work. “When it comes to adults leading, it’s important that they don’t try to have young people execute *their* vision. Let the youth come up with their own ideas. That’s a lot of what we do at SOA. We’re not going out and telling young people how to solve these problems. Rather, we’re empowering them to figure out their own methods to address these complex issues.”

In a few years' time, there will be countless youth leaders emerging from the many educational, vocational, and entrepreneurial programs at SOA, and working on solutions to the issues we are facing. As Daniela continues to work toward her goal of creating sustainable oceans, she has already made the greatest innovation of all – empowering youth to contribute to those solutions, all around the world.

*For most of history, man has had to fight nature to survive;  
in this century he is beginning to realize that,  
in order to survive, he must protect it.*

Jacques-Yves Cousteau

**Call To Action:** Join with Sustainable Ocean Alliance <https://www.soalliance.org> .

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