



Nicki Becker

Buenos Aires, Argentina

“When I was younger, I thought the climate crisis was just about Antarctica and the polar bears,” says Nicki Becker. “It’s all we ever saw in the media. Now I understand how far that message was from the reality of the climate situation.”

Argentina has had a long history of organizing strikes to galvanize support for social change. Growing up, Nicki had seen how her people had rallied against the multinational mega-mining operations in oil-rich province of Chubut that were irreparably polluting the waterways, air, and farmland, and devastating the local economies of these rural regions. That was ten years ago - and Argentinians are still trying to slow the exploitation of the people’s lands.

When she was 15, Nicki joined her first strike, for International Women’s Day. “Through this work, I began to be more aware of other issues—mainly, how there is no climate justice without justice for women and social justice,” she says, and adds, “It’s all intertwined.”

Then in 2019, she saw online how young people in Europe were banding together through the climate movement Fridays for Future. Ever curious, she started researching the environmental issues that were facing her country, and those she’d heard about at the strikes. She quickly realized the scale and severity of the environmental problems Argentina was facing. She learned about the role of climate change in creating more severe heat waves and longer, more devastating droughts—which were responsible for the fires that in 2020 burned over 1 million acres of land, and nearly another 100,000 acres in 2021 in Argentina. She also learned about the brewing humanitarian situations occurring at mega-mining sites all over the country. “I knew right then that my work had to be focused on climate action. But clearly, fighting for the environment is not just about demanding a reduction in greenhouse gases. It’s also about demanding climate justice for the most vulnerable among us.”

The more Nicki learned how pressing the crisis was for Argentinians, the more she couldn’t understand why people in her country weren’t talking about it. In fact, she wondered why young people in other parts of the world had information she didn’t have. Why don’t schools, universities, and media outlets in Argentina talk about the climate crisis if it’s so important? “At the beginning of my journey I got really motivated to find answers,” she says. “Seeing all these white Europeans, I was very aware of the lack of a Latin American perspective in the movement. Greta Thunberg got me thinking that we should try to create a movement in Argentina.”

So she formed Jovenes Por El Clima–Youth for Climate Argentina (YFCA)—to engage young Argentinians who were concerned about climate change to join with Greta and young activists around the world who were bringing the spotlight to the youth movement. In September 2019, for the first Global Climate Strike, YFCA organized climate rallies of 5,000, 10,000, and 45,000 people, across Argentina. “It wasn’t easy to pull it off. But it was worth it in the end. With this kind of turnout, we showed our government officials that we the people care about remedying the climate situation. And we sent a message: the people have the power to change anything we want.”

Empowered by this momentum, Nicki and her YFCA team finally got Argentinian leaders to listen to their demands and declare the country to be in a state of climate emergency. It was the first nation in Latin America to do so, and it set the stage for wide-sweeping reforms in the country. Later that year, the government signed a bill to create a committee of scientists, experts, youth leaders, and businesses to help guide the country to a more green and sustainable future.

For her pioneering work, Nicki was invited to travel to Madrid in December 2019 to be a representative at COP25, the Conference of Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). One of the

highlights for her was the opportunity to meet with the first woman president of Chile, Michelle Bachelet, who now serves as the United Nations Commissioner for Human Rights. “It was an opportunity for the media in Argentina to see a youth leader from their country on TV speaking about these issues,” she says, and adds, “I thought perhaps I could get them talking about the climate crisis back home.”

Nicki’s voice continues to be heard both in her country and around the world. In March 2020, she was selected as one of just five young people chosen by the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean as a champion of Escazu, a regional agreement that concerns the right for people to have access to information on environmental issues, and protects environmental defenders.

The resulting media attention from Nicki’s work has opened a lot of people’s eyes about the climate crisis. But she knows that activism must be combined with legislation, both in Argentina and internationally. Without legislation, Nicki doesn’t see a sustainable future. “We need our activism to lead to legislative change in the energy sector,” she says. “A just transition takes time, and it’s time that we don’t have.”

Nicki firmly believes we need specific legislative priorities on cleaner energy, plastic pollution, and multinational mining operations. “Even if every individual in Argentina does all of the things we are demanding, we are not going to change the climate crisis. We need legislation, cooperation from the global north, and we need corporations to join us in making these changes and having conversations about these issues in a more nuanced way. For example, we all want electric vehicles. But where is the mining being done? Who is being affected by the operation? And who is profiting? Without forward-thinking dialogue about *how* we go green, we don’t have a chance at redeeming the whole environmental situation.”

While Nicki has galvanized youth throughout her country, she knows that it will truly take an intergenerational approach to solve the climate crisis. “We need the adults in the room to hear us. Because sometimes, we just get ‘yes’d’ and receive nothing but empty promises. When we say we are afraid of what future we are going to live in, we are very sincere. We aren’t asking for a lot. We are asking for collective action to combat an emergency. We understand that the world is complex and that change takes time. But the change needs to start today, not tomorrow. And we need to get the adults on board to help enact the systemic change the world needs *now*.”

While the climate emergency young people have inherited is of epic proportions, Nicki believes it is precisely such situations that can give rise to the great potential within us. “We are burning bright in a precarious moment where we can change history,” she says. “We didn’t decide to be here. We were given the climate crisis and we can’t do anything but face up to it. In 50 years, we won’t have that opportunity. We *must* build a more fair and just future to persevere. And going forward, we will need everybody on board.”

Hope is what sustains Nicki through the ups and downs of her struggle for a more just future—and she wants to see more of it. “Hope is a great motivator, because it’s not born in a president or a company; it’s in the people. Hope is in your friends and in your family. It’s in you. Together, with hope, we can change the world.”

Ecology without class struggle is just gardening.

Chico Mendes

Call to Action: To learn more about Jovenes Por El Clima - Youth for Climate Argentina:
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