



Climate Movements in a Digital World

Iris Zhan

Maryland, USA

Iris Zhan was in the third grade when she first learned about the climate crisis about how the earth is suffering. “When our teacher told us about global warming and climate change, it really took a toll on me. I wondered, how can we have such a huge problem, and no one is doing anything about it?” She turned over the problem in her mind all night and in the morning, she went to school ready to learn more about what she could do to solve it. But the next day, her class was already moving on to another subject. “We were presented with the reality of our dire situation, and just like that, that was the end of our climate education.”

But Iris wasn’t about to stop there: she wanted to find a way to make an impact on this climate crisis outside of the classroom.

She began spending countless hours after school, educating herself on the myriad issues related to climate justice. She devoured news articles, read scientific papers, and perused social media for trending stories, so she could learn about the people involved in fighting for climate justice, and the issues she needed to understand. Over time, she became a self-taught expert on many environmental issues – though she struggled with trying to figure out what to do with all of her knowledge. “I was just a young girl trying to find a way to take on these gigantic issues,” she says. “A lot of the time, I felt really alone.”

The 2016 election was a turning point for Iris: she decided that no matter how hard and long the journey for climate justice was, she was going to take up the mantle for the youth of her generation. “The climate situation had become so urgent that I realized I had to take the energy I was putting into pursuing my environmental interests, and shift into action.”

Iris quickly realized that she couldn’t take on these massive environmental problems alone. So she attended a local green festival that was being held near her home in Howard County, Maryland, and she began networking with local environmental groups, clubs, associations, and grassroots organizations. This led to some minor community organizing efforts with Less Plastic Please, Citizens’ Climate Lobby, and the River Hill Watershed Committee.

It was a start, but Iris knew there was a bigger mission in store for her.

While organizing with these various communities, one thing stood out to Iris – all of these groups were adult-led. There was little or no youth engagement in Howard County on environmental issues. Through HoCo Climate Action, she learned about the work of Jamie Margolin and Zero Hour, and she understood her calling at once: she decided to begin organizing the youth of Howard County, and to create a supportive community for dealing with issues of climate justice. “Learning about Jamie and what she was doing online, and with the Youth Climate March was so inspiring,” she says. “There was nothing like that here.”

The fact that it was a young *woman* leading these events was inspirational for Iris on a whole different level. “I said, you know what? If Jamie can get out there and lead a climate march, why can’t I?”

And so she decided to take the lead. She started by creating Sunrise Movement Howard County—a local chapter of the Sunrise Movement. Sunrise is a national youth-led movement that supports the Green New Deal, and works to make climate change a priority issue for legislation.

As an introvert, it wasn't easy for Iris to be such a visible leader in this way, but she knew it was something her community desperately needed. "To really achieve change, we needed more people on board in my community. And we needed the youth to be visible. Relying on adult-led organizations to bring young people in was not going to be effective. These issues are going to affect the youth the most, so I saw the importance of taking the initiative."

Iris began leading climate marches, walkouts, strikes; and she lobbied frequently in her hometown. She was so successful that she became a trainer for Sunrise on a national level, where she educates other youth leaders around the country on climate issues.

She also cofounded Fridays For Future Digital (FFFD), to expand digital climate protests worldwide. "It started as just one sign each week, a sign that had a message in support of climate justice. But the more people began to join the movement, the more complex it became. Before we knew it, we were international. It was amazing!" She adds, "We wanted to take real digital actions to make change, and we did. We're proud of that." To date, FFFD has partnered on digital events with Polluters Out, Extinction Rebellion, Re-Earth Initiative, and the Mother Earth Project, to bring youth activists of all backgrounds together in support of climate justice for all.

Iris has been an effective youth organizer, but her success didn't come easy. There were lots of struggles along the way. She hopes to be able to provide some guidance for youth who are just entering this space, so they know what they are up against. "It's important that other youth who want to get involved with cause-related work understand that adversity is part of the journey," she says. "All you can do is try to innovate, solve problems, and build communities along the way. And when you get through to the other side — which you will — you will be glad you took on the world."

For youth leaders, peer pressure can be a tough issue to deal with. At the onset of her journey, few of Iris's peers understood what she was trying to do with her climate justice activities. "I got a lot of criticism from the kids at my school who didn't get what climate justice was all about. Sometimes I even heard mumblings from the adults. I definitely didn't get the support I thought I would. But once you grow a little, you will see that those jeers are so small when compared to the scale of the climate crisis."

Working heavily in the digital arena, there are also some bullying issues that Iris has had to learn how to deal with. "The biggest issue climate activists face online are the trolls. Insults about your looks. Your race. Your gender. It can be pretty toxic stuff. But you know you are having success when people waste their time trying to come at you online," she says, with a laugh. "The internet allows for such amazing community building, like the community we've built with FFFD. It can be hard at times dealing with that darker side of digital engagement, but there's no point in listening to the negativity. We have to let the good shine through."

In the future, Iris wants to work on strengthening the communities that support the climate justice movement. "I've met some of my best friends building communities that do good. And I hear from people all around the world every day about how I've impacted them. It makes me want to create more communities, and I want the people and the networks to become even stronger." She believes that they will be, when all people are given the tools and access to contribute equally to the community and the movement. "Everybody can play a part," she says. "And it takes all kinds of people. For instance, I'm an introvert. I'm shy! And I'm not a great public speaker. But that doesn't mean I don't lead, just because I don't fit the traditional description of a leader. The point is, it doesn't matter who you are or what you look like. If you can light the fire in somebody, that person will live an inspired life because of you."

The countless numbers of youth activists across the world that have been inspired by Iris are working hard now, to ensure that we will have a brighter future ahead.

It is my mission to change the world. I'm not kidding: Make no small plans, dream mighty things. I feel if we get enough people engaged in climate change, we will get enough people to change the world.

Bill Nye

Call to Action: Learn how to take digital climate action to the next level with Iris at Fridays for Future Digital (FFFD).
<https://fffdigital.carrd.co>

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