



Hope Springs from Down Under
Jean Hinchliffe
Australia

In Sydney's inner city, Jean Hinchliffe was safe from Australia's raging bushfires - but not free from their impact. The sky over her home was a mixture of brown and gray smoke. The air was thick with particulate, and had been at various times throughout the bushfire season of 2019-2020. The world watched in horror, most people powerless to do anything. Some celebrities gave money. And firefighters came from all over to fight the fires.

Thankfully Jean, a 15-year-old youth climate activist, didn't lose anything precious, like so many others had. "I've been fortunate, but I know so many others who haven't been," she says. One of her fellow activists was evacuated shortly before her 18th birthday party. "By the end of the night, their home was destroyed. It just goes to show that when dealing with the climate crisis, things can change in a flash."

Sadly, Australia has become a tinderbox. The last devastating outbreak of bushfires began in September 2019, and lasted for months. This is mainly the result of increased temperatures, a severe drought, and the inability to fight fires by "backburning" in these conditions. Almost all of Australia was affected, with fires raging across the country, including in Tasmania. Roughly 72,000 square miles of land were impacted, and there were at least 34 reported deaths. Worst of all, the ongoing toll on families, local economies, and the climate, will not be fully realized for years to come.

When Jean started her work in activism, at the age of 13, she didn't expect to be championing the fight for climate justice. In fact, at first she was involved fighting for justice in an entirely different area. "In Australia, we had a campaign for marriage equality. I saw an ad on Twitter asking for volunteers. As a believer in the cause, I joined. I handed out pamphlets and flyers, and made cold calls to people. We ended up with a strong win for the Yes side. It was empowering, knowing I had been involved in that win. Even if I only shifted a few votes, my voice mattered."

It was then Jean realized the impact that youth could make. She immediately got involved with other young people and activist groups, including the #StopAdani campaign.

#StopAdani was protesting the construction of the Adani coal mine in Queensland, which was to be the largest coal mining operation in the southern hemisphere. It would impact the environment in a variety of ways. The mining site overlapped with one of the last remaining habitats of the endangered black-throated finch. There would be an inevitable cost to Australia's coral reefs as well, since most of the coal would be shipped near the reefs on its way out of Australia to be used by developing countries. It would also *increase* carbon emissions at a time when people all over the world were demanding that leaders work to transition *away* from coal and carbon-based economies.

So far, activists in Australia and abroad have been able to keep the mine from opening, by protesting the banks, insurers, and ancillary businesses that are supporting Adani. "#StopAdani was a great point of mobilization for lots of people, and it was a huge success," Jean says. "Sometimes these issues seem difficult to understand, or far away. But this one was very local, which made it easy for the average Australian to get behind."

Around the time Jean was involved with #StopAdani, a friend of hers sent her a link to the School Strike 4 Climate website in October 2018. This movement had three main demands for the Australian government: no

new sources of fossil fuels; transition to fully renewable energy by 2030; and the creation of a just transition plan for workers currently employed in the fossil fuel industry.

“At that point, few people knew about what Greta Thunberg was doing,” Jean says. “But in Australia, the youth were inspired. In Castlemaine, a small town near Melbourne, a few girls who read about Greta in *The Guardian* took up the cause. They knew they had to bring this message to Australia somehow and were in the process of organizing a strike in (their capital city) Melbourne. I sent them an email, saying I want to make this happen in (in my capital city) Sydney. I got their support, which was great, but it was also a lot of pressure. I’d never done anything on this scale! We decided that we wanted to make a *big* impact, and instead of having a series of small strikes, we decided to unify strikes across Australia. And leading up to November 30, 2018, we started getting a little traction.”

Ultimately, what pushed the planned school strikes into the mainstream was Prime Minister Scott Morrison. He had responded to the students’ concern by saying, “The children should be in school, learning about Australian history.” *Not* participating in activism.

“His response was indicative of the larger problems our government won’t tackle. It even became a tagline among many young activists. Right there, our strike exploded. We were covered by national and international media, which actually unified our events in a way that we wouldn’t have been able to do on our own. As a result, the turnouts were just staggering. In Sydney, we had anticipated we’d get 1,000 people, if we did well – but we had a turnout of 5,000 locally, and 15,000 nationally.”

And it didn’t stop there. Their next strike was set for March 15, 2019. This strike had a turnout of 150,000 people in Australia, with over one million striking in support internationally. Then in September 2019, they held their largest strike ever. “When I walked past the news agency that week, the headline said *What do teachers think about the climate strike?* It wasn’t explaining the climate strike. It assumed by now everyone already knew. Less than a year prior, we didn’t even exist. But on September 20, we held the largest climate mobilization in Aussie history. 80,000 people showed up in Sydney, 300,000 joined nationally, and approximately 7 million internationally. I co-emceed the Sydney strike and gave a speech to the crowd. It was unbelievable!” She pauses, and smiles. “Much easier than delivering a presentation to an English class of 25.”

When Jean spoke that day, the passion of the youth in the audience energized her, and her message was enthusiastically received. “This is not an inner-city issue, or a greenie issue. This is not a young person’s issue or a wealthy person’s issue. This is an *everybody* issue. We are the majority. *And we demand change!*” she shouted, to a gallery of cheers from the crowd.

It was a major victory for the youth climate movement in Australia, and beyond.

At just 16, Jean is still in high school. She is like many of her peers in some ways, and different in others. She is certainly wise beyond her years. Outside of school, she has taken up various interests, such as acting, and has excelled in that field as well. Currently, she has a starring role in the Australian series *The Unlisted*. In time, she hopes to have her acting work influence her activism, and vice versa. Most importantly, she wants to use any platform she has to continue urging youth to stand up for causes they are passionate about.

For those who want to get involved, Jean has an inspiring message. “It can be intimidating to join a rally with 80,000 people. Or maybe it feels like it’s for experienced people with qualifications you don’t have. But that’s not the case. Everyone is here to help you learn and grow. Take the leap. You are so much more powerful and have so much more influence than you could ever imagine.”

The conversation about the climate crisis has become global and now involves all age groups. But Jean feels there are ways to improve the dialogue. “Often, when people talk about the climate crisis, they talk about how it’s an issue that doesn’t discriminate. How it impacts everyone equally. That’s not quite true. It’s often people in the countries that emit the least amount of pollution who will be feeling the impacts of climate change more than other places. Australia has been on the frontlines recently, and it’s been a wakeup call to what we’ve been neglecting to confront for so long. So it’s up to us, we who are more aware now, and who have a voice, to ally with those who are most impacted. They are often given less of a voice, and they rarely have their stories told.”

Jean doesn't know what her next project will be. She does know that she will continue to campaign for the climate, in one way or another. And that's a very good thing. With Jean, and other youth like her leading the charge, there's hope for a better world.

I believe that education is all about being excited about something. Seeing passion and enthusiasm helps push an educational message.

Steve Irwin

Call to Action : Learn more about School Strike 4 Climate <https://www.schoolstrike4climate.com>

Stone Soup Leadership Institute
www.stonesoupleadership.org
www.soup4youngworld.com