



The Children Will Lead the Way

Valentina Ossa

New York

For days, 12-year old Valentina Ossa had been organizing with a couple of friends. They'd met secretly, hung up posters, and handed out flyers. It felt a little like a conspiracy--their teachers hadn't noticed their efforts to organize a collective school walkout, in solidarity with the Global Youth Climate Strike.

"We did all this right under our teachers' noses," Valentina says. "When we first started getting the word out, I told everyone, if you need any information, come meet us on the playground."

For Valentina and her little band of young organizers, their plan was a success. On March 15, 2019, more than 180 students simultaneously walked out of class to protest global inaction in the face of the quickly escalating climate crisis.

For Valentina, it was one more example of how activism can empower people and bring them together.

Activism is a longstanding tradition in Valentina's family. Her grandfather is Peter Yarrow, of the legendary folk music group, Peter, Paul and Mary. As spokesperson for the most prominent folk group of the 1960s, he used his voice to rally the nation's young people to get involved in the Civil Rights movement, and protest the Vietnam War. Valentina's mother, Bethany Yarrow, followed in her father's footsteps as a musician, and as an activist.

And the tradition carried on to the next generation: when she was just five years old, Valentina had her first experience protesting. "I have been an activist my entire life," she says, proudly.

Valentina has spent much of her life in the rural community of New York's Schoharie Valley. She loves her backyard there, where a 120-foot waterfall splashes into a little swimming pool, the deep blue water turning into a shimmering green as it flows downriver.

But when she was five years old, the little paradise in the mountains was suddenly under threat.

"We are on top of a huge shale reserve, and they wanted to frack for gas," she explains. "I didn't want the water to be contaminated. I was afraid the river would die."

Valentina learned that fracking is a process through which companies extract gas or oil that is trapped in rock formations underground; that the gas collected from fracking causes a higher level of emissions than conventional gas; and that fracking sites can cause significant spills of poisonous chemicals, and earthquakes.

For Valentina it was clear that something needed to be done. "When my mom told that they were going to go ahead with fracking in 'sacrifice zones,' I started crying," she remembers. "The very next day I wrote a letter to Governor Cuomo, asking him not to frack the water."

Dear Governor Cuomo,

My name is Valentina. I am 5 years old. I don't want the bad people to frack our water. I spent all yesterday crying because I don't want them to poison our water. I want the water to be clear because I don't want anyone to be in

pain. So if anyone wants to frack the water tell them they can't. Governor Cuomo, I hope you are the best Governor ever and save our water."

"I told my mom that I wanted to go to a protest in front of the governor's office in New York City, so she took me, and I got my whole preschool class to go too," Valentina remembers. "We made a banner that said DON'T FRACK OUR FUTURE. That was the first protest I went to. And we still use that banner at climate marches."

Valentina and her mother tirelessly continued to fight fracking and the pipeline infrastructure that was being planned throughout the region. "First fracking was banned, and then we stopped the Constitution Pipeline. That was a big accomplishment," Valentina says. "I was really surprised. I thought 'Wow! I really *can* do something about these issues."

When Valentina started school, she and her family moved to New York City, where she continued to go to protests and meet fascinating people – environmentalists who were passionate about the dangers of fracking, as well as pollution, carbon emissions, and the increasingly violent and frequent forest fires.

Slowly, she started seeing the bigger picture. "I was really worried about all of these smaller things, and it kind of added up," she says. "So I did my research; and then I decided to take a stand on climate change, so I could speak on *all* of these issues."

On March 15, 2019, the day of the first Global School Strike for the climate, Valentina organized her schoolmates again—this time to join her in taking a stand for the planet. In her speech that day she said, "I am here to stand for all the people who don't have the courage, awareness, or opportunity to stand up for themselves. For all the kids my age who have been told, over and over again, that they are too young to make a change."

Valentina was grateful for the passionate support of her schoolmates. She feels it is so important for young people to raise their voices and share their concerns. "Every time I've voiced my ideas, I felt so proud that I had done it," she says about her activism. "I felt that I had contributed something."

Valentina has continued to stand up for what she believes in. After organizing the walkout at her school in Brooklyn, she and about 20 of her schoolmates joined millions of other young people in New York City for the Global Action Strike on September 2019. She was inspired by Greta Thunberg, and also by Alexandria Villaseñor, a cofounder of U.S. Youth Climate Strike. By the time Valentina joined her, Alexandria had already been striking for a couple of months in front of the United Nations. For the next several months, Valentina joined her: she went to the U.N. every Friday and she and Alexandria sat on a bench close to the big headquarters building. Valentina's signs had slogans like "SEA LEVELS ARE RISING AND SO ARE WE," or "THE CHILDREN WILL LEAD THE WAY."

Sometimes it was only Valentina and Alexandria; sometimes they were joined by others. Valentina always brought a few extra signs for those who hadn't brought their own, so that people driving by could see what they were doing, and know why they were protesting.

But she did more than just hold up signs. In May 2019, she travelled to Washington D.C., where she spoke at a protest in front of the White House. Valentina had been enraged by the Trump administration's destructive environmental policies. So, speaking through a megaphone in front of Donald Trump's office window seemed like a great opportunity to her.

"Suddenly it hit me that I was at the *White House*," Valentina remembers. "But then I thought, you know what? I don't care, I'm going to do it—so what if it *is* the White House!" As she stepped onto the stage, she felt an empowering sense of calm determination. And when she raised her voice, she knew exactly what she would say.

"I am here, at the White House of the United States of America, sending out an SOS to the whole world. I am asking all the politicians, all the people in power, and every single person who hears me to stand with the children. Do everything you can. Get involved! Make sacrifices, big and small. It's going to take all of us. This is about the survival of the planet, and we are out of time!"

“We only have now,” Valentina says. “We can’t do anything to fix what happened in the past. We only have the present—and we have to do something now, or we’re not going to make the changes we need to make. People may say ‘What can I do? I’m only one person.’ But we’ve proven that when we come together demonstrate, and speak our piece, there is no way the power structure can avoid being attentive.”

I think a hero is any person really intent on making this a better place for all people.

Maya Angelou

Call to Action: Speak up for what you believe in. Find a way to get involved—join a protest or a climate change organization; or start your own project. Do something!

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