



Indigenous Leader Invites Youth to Share Their Gifts

Xiye Bastida
New York City

As a child, Xiye Bastida had learned from her father's Indigenous Otomi-Toltec culture to respect the Earth. From her mother's historical studies on Maya culture and society, she learned to respect Mesoamerican knowledge systems. Her family lived a simple life in San Pedro Tultepec, a wetland community in Toluca Valley home to migratory geese and ducks from Canada where families still fish and weave baskets from bulrushes. "Everything about my upbringing taught me to be that voice of unity and balance," she says.

Then, in 2015, when Xiye was 12 years old, after a long drought, her hometown was devastated with massive floods. She and her parents, who had been offered a job to teach about Indigenous value systems and philosophy, left for New York City without knowing how the town would recover from the flood. "At the time, I didn't really understand about climate change and its role in these increasingly volatile weather emergencies," Xiye says. "I never even considered that there were people and businesses who didn't care about Mother Earth the same way my family and I do."

Thinking back on what happened in San Pedro Tultepec, Xiye realizes that the climate crisis was already there, and affecting frontline communities like hers. What was an island in the middle of a wetland in the 1970s was severely impacted by a modernization program that included the elimination of the 8,000-hectare lake, the exploitation of the underground aquifer to supply Mexico City, and the stigmatization of the traditional way of living. Half of the island lost its wetland and, little by little, urban sprawl invaded the wetland bed. Just to make a living villagers had to adapt to wood furniture making, and as demand grew, shops were built beneath the original water level.

"The people who don't have the resources to deal with flooding by going somewhere else, or who don't have the infrastructure to tolerate it when it comes, are left to bear the brunt of the crisis," Xiye says. "In the wealthy sections of Mexico City, people were given aid, and repairs from the flooding were swiftly made."

Now a 19-year-old college student majoring in environmental studies with a concentration in international relations, Xiye says, "This was the first time that I realized just what climate injustice really was. That's when I set my sights on fighting climate change for the most vulnerable among us, who are being so disproportionately impacted."

Inspired by Greta Thunberg's Fridays for Future movement in Europe, Xiye responded by cofounding the Fridays for Future chapter in New York City. At the Beacon School, she created an Environmental Club and rallied her classmates to join her in the upcoming climate strike on March 15. "I did everything I could. I organized. I did graphic designing. I put up flyers; they'd get taken down every day. I'd put up more," she says. "I even got my teachers to understand what we were protesting. They understood. But nobody was really imagining how big of an impact a few kids could make. Myself included."

A month later, when the day finally arrived, Xiye thought it was going to just be her and few friends striking. As it turned out, 600 fellow students from her school participated in the walkout. Empowered by this show of solidarity, Xiye next set her sights on the Global Climate Strike scheduled for September 20. She, and a core team of only 10 teenagers and 50 others, worked together with 10 adults from climate organizations, and rallied 300,000 to strike for climate action. They marched from Foley Square to Battery Park, carrying signs that read, "There is No Plan(et) B," and chanting "Green New Deal, make it real," and "The sea is rising, so must we." It's estimated that more than 4 million young people and adults joined together that day to make their voices heard. When Greta Thunberg arrived by sailboat in

New York Harbor to attend the United Nations Climate Summit with world leaders, Xiye officially welcomed Greta. “Fridays for Future NYC really showed our leaders the power that young people have to impact climate change, and there's no looking back,” she says.

Now, as a leading voice for Indigenous and immigrant visibility in climate activism, Xiye has gone on to work with The People's Climate Movement. Then, when the Covid-19 pandemic hit, with the lockdown Xiye shifted from rallying people in the streets to educating people online. Her new venture, Re-Earth Initiative, focuses on radical inclusivity, diversity, and accountability through workshops, toolkits, and webinars. She is especially passionate about increasing awareness of the importance of reciprocity and intersectionality in the global youth climate movement.

A powerful public speaker, Xiye has gained a reputation for her ability to inspire climate action. At the Global Citizens Festival in 2019, she spoke about the intersection of climate change with human rights issues, which many people outside of activist circles don't yet understand. “We haven't thought too much about the effect the climate crisis is having on refugees.” Xiye says. “But the displacement of people is an inevitable consequence of the climate crisis. And it's not just that the climate crisis *will* create climate refugees; it's already happening!” Reflecting back to her own personal story, she educates people about how extended periods of drought result in instability of crops, and force people away from their ancestral lands. And when there are irregular flooding patterns, people must seek shelter elsewhere. “We need not only to mitigate these issues, but to adapt, with well-structured systems and policy to deal with climate refugees.”

For Xiye, UN Sustainable Development Goal #17 is the most important goal: *Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development*, since it has the capacity to link people, goals, and places of all kinds in service of a broader, sustainable world. “Partnerships are a necessity. Cooperation is the key,” she says. “We need for people to not focus just on one goal without thinking about all the others. Having all kinds of people from all types of background is what will make this possible.”

Xiye also speaks out on educational platforms like TED Talks to inform people about the climate crisis. “TED has become a great advocate for climate education with its Countdown,” she explains. “A lot of businesses are shifting their whole way of thinking to be more sustainable. And when educational networks partake in community building around these issues, it creates a really cohesive coalition going forward.”

Xiye gave a memorable TED Talk, which was framed as a letter to her *abuela*, her grandmother. “The world is so big, and it has so many bad habits,” she said. “I didn't know how a 15-year-old was supposed to change anything, but I had to try.” Reflecting back on her speech she says, “It was a way to share my story, my frustration, my hopes and dreams for the future in a new way that I hoped would influence people, because what we need is more people supporting this movement. We especially need more youth to be involved as climate activists. If there were more of us, none of us would have to be full-time activists.”

Wherever Xiye goes, she finds youth eager to get involved but they don't know how or where to start. For them, she has some guidance. “It doesn't matter what your gift or passion is in life. We need youth from all walks, because diversity of thinking and skills is what is going to make solutions possible. Any skill that you have can be used to address the climate crisis; whether you are an architect, photographer, educator, scientist, or activist, we could use your skills because we need all the skills to face up to this emergency.”

That said, she cautions youth to avoid the pressure to change who they are to fit into a particular role. “Be who you are, know yourself, and ask yourself what you can add,” she says. “If you don't find anything that fits you, just Google a cause that you are interested in supporting and get involved. If there's nothing, come up with it yourself. It's true that a lot of times there are no spaces for us at the table to share our voices and opinions. And if you can't find a seat at the table, just build your own table! You will make an impact, because youth always do. We have more influence than we think we do, and we need to take advantage of that.”

For adults, Xiye doesn't necessarily want support for the youth as much as she wants support for the overall climate movement. “The youth grow really fast. I started out at 15, and in a snap of my fingers, I'm 19. And I've left my youth behind. I had a lot of great things to say as a youth, and I was heard by plenty of adults. But what it boils down to is that the youth can't vote. So when adults work to amplify the demands of youth, to be heard in their circles of influence, that's great, and we are grateful for that. But when you vote for what we want, that *really* makes an impact. Beyond that,

if you have the means, support us. And if you don't, get out there and organize—that doesn't cost anything. Both are important. We are going to need all the help we can get to face up to this crisis of our age.”

To her family, and her ever-supportive grandmother, the words she spoke under the bright lights at TED still ring true. “Thank you for inviting me to love the world since the moment I was born.” With this love, she will devote her life to making this earth a better place for everyone. And she hopes for many more allies to join her on the journey.

The meaning of life is to find your gift.

The purpose of life is to give it away.

Pablo Picasso

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Stone Soup Leadership Institute
www.stonesoupleadership.org
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