Protest and Beyond: Annie Leonard On What You Can Do

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Ariana Brocious: I'm Ariana Brocious.

Kousha Navidar: I'm Kousha Navidar.

Ariana Brocious: And this is Climate One.

[music change]

Ariana Brocious: Kousha, when you hear the word "protest," what comes to mind?

Kousha Navidar: Oh, lots of people in the streets, lots of lots of chanting, clever signs – hopefully clever….

Ariana Brocious: Yeah, that's a common image. Especially lately as this country has seen some of the largest protests in history take place. And protests like that CAN be effective. But that's not the only way to create change, of course.

Kousha Navidar: Right. Today we've got three different conversations about the range of ways to make change – from an activist, an organizer and a politician. We taped all these conversations together in front of a live audience at the Commonwealth Club during SF Climate Week – and we're really excited to share them.

Ariana Brocious: Annie Leonard is former executive director of Greenpeace USA. She's got a new book, called **Protest**: Respect It, Defend It, Use It, which chronicles a lot of the most famous protests that you've probably heard of and some that you might not.

Kousha Navidar: Yeah, I mean, we're talking about protests all the way back to Socrates and Martin Luther to the Boston Tea Party, up to the No Kings protests that we're seeing today. So as we started talking, I asked Annie Leonard to share the story of one of her favorite protests.

Annie Leonard: I'll pick one in San Francisco because we are in San Francisco. The section 504 sit-ins. Absolutely amazing. It was a, an occupation, the largest, peaceful occupation of a federal building in US history in the early seventies by a group of disabled people. And they were protesting for the implementation of a thing called Section 504 that would eliminate barriers to participation. And it was totally incredible because these disabled folks, many of them had never been outside without their assistants. Doors weren't wide enough for wheelchairs. Curbs didn't have wheelchair ramps. It was incredible, the solidarity. There was also not a disabled community identity there. So, um, people who were deaf and people who were paralyzed, all these people came together, took care of each other. Occupied the building for nearly a month. During the time the authorities cut off the phone line so they could have no communication. So deaf people would go to the window and sign their updates for the media down to the people on the ground, and someone who could read sign language would then interpret so they could continue their media outreach and share news back and forth. So then the government said, okay, no food and water deliveries. So one of the disabled guys inside was a Black Panther. So the Black Panthers came with dinner and the authorities said no. And the Black Panthers said You're either gonna let us deliver dinner every single night, or we're gonna go get all our friends. So they delivered dinner every single night. Um, the uh, eventually some of them wanted to go to Washington DC to take the protests there, but you couldn't get wheelchairs onto airplanes. So some unions came with trucks that had lifts to get the people onto these trucks. I mean, it was cross movement, courageous. It absolutely was an incredibly inspiring, and they won. And I was just talking to one of the participants the other day and about how often people forget how much protest helped bring us things that we take for granted today. And he said those wheelchair ramps didn't cut themselves on the curb, and we need to remember that.

Kousha Navidar: I, I love that story and I think it's really important that you said it was successful in some ways because a lot of the protests that you're talking about in your book weren't necessarily successful as we might imagine it. Standing Rock was a big deal, but the pipeline still got built. The Rocking Chair Rebellion, which had a bunch of retirees protesting in front banks, raised the profile of Third Act, but no bank divested from fossil fuels. And so my question as I was reading, I wanted to know how effective are protests, both those that grab headlines and those that don't?

Annie Leonard: Right. So protests are effective in a lot of different ways. Um, one is elevating an issue onto the public agenda. Yes, the Dakota Access Pipeline was built. But do you think people in the United States know more about indigenous land rights than they before? Absolutely. So, one is elevating an issue. Another is building cohesion and community among those who are protesting. I mean, it's hard to go up against authoritarian regimes and big oil companies. And one of the things that we can do that most allows us to keep doing this work is have a sense of community. So protesting strengthens the commitment and strengthens the community of people that are participating. There's a lot of evidence that was done, um, research that shows that protests can influence electoral outcomes. We saw that after the Tea Party explosion of protests. We saw that after No Kings and then the most recent elections.

Kousha Navidar: You're saying because people are more aware of a certain issue and more likely to vote towards it or against it?

Annie Leonard: People are more aware and they pay more attention once they've participated in a protest, they tend to pay more attention to the issues. To track it. So protest has lots and lots of benefits and it's also how you measure success. Um, it depends, you know, it's, I don't know of any protest that they did a protest and the next day they won. I often say that making change is like

laying a stone path through a garden and protest might be every fourth or eighth or 200th stone, but at strategic times when well prepared, it can really move us forward. In the book there's 42 protests and we talk about things that had achieved, same sex marriage, you know, the wheelchair ramps on curbs, weekends. Um, you know, a lot, lots of things. And we say, we ask, would those things have happened without protest? And I say one, certainly hope so, but in every case, protests sped it along.

Kousha Navidar: Uh, how many times have you been arrested?

Annie Leonard: Oh gosh, I probably, I don't know, a dozen. I'd have to count.

Kousha Navidar: It's like a stone path. And along the way sometimes you get arrested.

Annie Leonard: Yeah. At key times.

Kousha Navidar: Um, what good did it do? Getting arrested?

Annie Leonard: Strengthened my commitment. It signaled to others that I take this issue so strong that I'm willing to put my body on the line. For every person that protests, whether it's marching in no kings or putting yourself between a whale and a harpoon or whatever it is. For every person who protests, there's countless others watching. I call them the protest-curious that are watching that, like, especially right now, a lot of people don't feel comfortable with the direction our country's going, and a lot of them haven't protested before. They're not sure. They may not identify as a protestor when they see people out there protesting, then it welcomes them. The other thing is that something happens deep inside you when you protest, is our awareness of what's going on in the world. Whether it's, you know, the continued fossil fuel expansion that's threatening our ability to live on the planet to our neighbors being abducted off the street, you know, to so many things. We know it's not right and it feels not right. And when we're not actively fighting it, we feel out of alignment. It's, it's, there's lack of congruity when we take action, when we join with others and saying, no, this is not who we are. This is not what we want. Your, your values and your body comes into alignment in such a powerful way. And from that place of greater alignment and value, you can be a much more effective and resilient change maker.

Kousha Navidar: Can I ask you about that? This is really hitting me right now, personally, we're gonna get to that in a second. But I'm hearing you say that there are protest-curious that watch you and your choice impacts more than just yourself, but putting your body on the line, like, I want folks to think about that for a second. That is a very big thing to do. And I'm wondering how that changes you. How has putting your body changed you as a person?

Annie Leonard: Uh, putting my body on the line has made me a stronger, uh, more fierce and more focused activist. And even when I'm not doing protests, all the things that come up, I mean, I think that when you launch a campaign, you don't start with protests.You lobby, you do research, you do public education, you do all these other things, knowing that you got in your back pocket, that you're willing to put yourself on the line if you need to, allows you to do all those things with a greater moral clarity. Mm-hmm. So it's made my willingness to put myself on the line and as many of you in this room have, it adds to our, the clarity and the integrity with which we can be activists.

Kousha Navidar: I'm thinking through something right now and I wanna get your perspective on it. Uh, I'm an immigrant. I was born in Iran. I moved here when I was very young. It is a complicated time to be an immigrant. I don't think it's ever been an easy time to be an immigrant. Um, but I used to protest a lot more than I I do now. I just don't feel as comfortable as I, I used to. And I don't know what the question is here. I'm just, I've got you on stage. What do you make of that? Do you hear other people say that?

Annie Leonard: Well, we should think very broadly about what protest means. Um, some protest is marching down the street, but that's only one kind of protest. There's lots of other protests canceling your Amazon Prime subscription could be a protest canceling your Disney subscription when they tried to censor Jimmy Kimmel is a kind of protest. There's lots of different kinds of protests that you don't have to only be chanting and marching down the street. The other thing is there's different roles for people at different times. If I was an immigrant, I too would be nervous about going out on the street. So those of us who have citizenship, who have other dominant group identities, the onus is on us. To take even more risks than we normally would to put ourselves out there to use the privilege that we have. You look at Minneapolis, it was so beautiful, the different kinds of protests that that happened. Do you know there was a group of carpenters that were going around and fixing people's doors that were kicked in by ICE. Wow. That's a act of protest and also an act of love, which I think protest is. Yeah, that makes, if you can't march in the street or you don't feel comfortable marching in the street, make sandwiches for the families who are scared to come outside of their houses. You know, there's so many other things to do besides marching in the street. That's only one of an infinite number of ways to protest.

Kousha Navidar: When do you feel like you made that realization, the, full ecosystem of protest?

Annie Leonard: Well, I've been protesting for a long time and I like to try everything. I like to try everything, but I'll tell you when I really realized it is. When I realized that we've had an authoritarian breakthrough in this country, um, the kinds of protests you do in a democratic context, um, focus more on persuasion, um, and on electoral work. 'cause if you have a democratic context, even a flawed and imperfect democracy like ours, we still had democratic norms and institutions and practices. And in a democratic context, there are certain kinds of protests that work, which is, you know, what we've all honed for decades and decades. , But in an authoritarian context, a lot of those kinds of protests don't work. Trump is not going to change his immigrant policy because we are marching down the streets with signs saying we love our immigrant neighbors.

You can't move an authoritarian. So what you have to do is shift the way that you protest. And the main kind of protest under an authoritarian context is non-cooperation. No authoritarian can advance their agenda on their own. They need the support of all these different pillars of society, the media, um, academia, business, the military. And so rather than trying to get the authoritarian to shift, which he really does not care about us. You can't get them to shift you, you target these and you withdraw your cooperation. So, so the kinds of protests that we need to do now, we need to think much more creatively. When, um, Trump was elected the first time I was the executive director of Greenpeace, and we hung a giant banner over the White House that said, resist.

We probably wouldn't do that today. We probably wouldn't do that because those people hanging off the banner would be risking felonies and you know, losing the right to vote. So many other things. So instead we have to shift our kinds of thinking and be much more creative and expansive about what does it mean to protest an authoritarian regime, uh, especially in this moment when the window to solve climate is shrinking.

Music: In

Ariana Brocious: Coming up, Annie Leonard says Greenpeace USA can’t be defeated, even by a strategic lawsuit that could bankrupt the organization:

Annie Leonard: Greenpeace is an orientation of the spirit. Greenpeace is what you feel in your gut when you look at your daughter or granddaughter and you promise her a better future. They can't take that away. They, there's no way they can silence that.

Ariana Brocious: That’s up next, when Climate One continues.

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Music: Out

Kousha Navidar: This is Climate One. I’m Kousha Navidar. Let’s get back to my conversation with Annie Leonard, which we taped in front of a live audience at the Commonwealth Club during SF Climate Week.

Leonard was executive director of Greenpeace USA from 2014 to 2023. During that time, two different multi-billion dollar companies sued Greenpeace for its role in public protests. Greenpeace and others say these are strategic lawsuits against public participation or SLAPP suits, aimed at stifling dissent.

One was dismissed, but the other suit, which was brought by Energy Transfer, the company that built the Dakota Access Pipeline, went ahead. And in March of last year, a jury in North Dakota awarded a $667 million judgment against Greenpeace. (A judge later reduced the amount to “only” $345 million.)

Annie Leonard: So, I had been the lead witness at the trial. It was in North Dakota. And, a SLAPP suit is a strategic lawsuit against public participation. I mean, these lawsuits are meritless. They are meant to silence bankrupt, chill, terrify activists, which they often do. Um, so I was there on the witness stand. It was an oil dominated state, an oil dominated jury. I mean, it was just a grueling trial, the company had zero evidence of their accusations. They actually accused Greenpeace of organizing the Standing Rock protest and manipulating Native Americans to go protest. I mean, that is so racist and just outrageous. So I did my absolute best for months. I prepared, I did my absolute best on that witness stand. I literally got off the witness stand, went to the hotel and got my bag and flew a very long flight to Ecuador where some indigenous communities that were fighting oil and gas had invited myself and some colleagues to come tour to see firsthand what does it look like to, um, drill for oil and gas in the once pristine Amazon. And so we had spent a week while the trial's wrapping up, I was giving little updates every couple days. We had spent a week in the rainforest. Absolutely beautiful. I just, I mean. Totally profound to be deep in the rainforest. You know, two days up river on a canoe with these indigenous folks who were fighting the oil wells. And then after we had experienced the rainforest, we went to where there's oil drilling, so we could see what it is like to have oil drilling in the Amazon. And there was a huge flare letting off gas. So it was so hot. There were dead bugs everywhere because the bugs were attracted to the flare and incinerated. We had seen this place where they're leaking oil into this river so people can't swim or drink or anything there anymore. It was just absolute hell on Earth. It's in a place called Lago Agrillo in Ecuador, and I was literally standing next to this with all these indigenous people. It was the indigenous people who lived in this area, had invited indigenous people from the southern part of the country that still live in a rainforest.

And their, the government was trying to lease their areas for drilling, and the oil companies were going there saying, you'll get schools and hospitals and all this stuff. And so the, the people who lived there wanted their friends of the brothers and sisters to see what it's like. Their eyeballs were

huge when they saw this devastation, they were just stunned. So we're literally standing there and they're discussing how can they prevent this? And I got the news of the jury verdict right there. And I, I thought I was gonna vomit. And I didn't know if it was the verdict or the gas, but what hit me is that the indigenous folks from the south were saying, how can we prevent this?

Because the forest to them is them. It's, it's their home, it's their church, it's their pharmacy, it's their grocery store, it's their building supply store. It's them. And the way they talked about them in the forest, like there was no barrier where they end and the forest begins. It was just, it was fascinating to be there with them. And so this was an assault on them and they were so desperate to stop it. And what the organizers from the north were saying. Is all the things Greenpeace did at Standing Rock. They said, you know, have international allies, do nonviolent protest. Everything that Greenpeace did follow indigenous leadership and Greenpeace just got this 600 million verdict. And so I stood there and thought, oh my God, if we lose the right to protest, we stand to lose everything that we love.

Kousha Navidar: If the, uh, idea behind SLAPP suits is to stifle dissent, then do you think it's working?

Annie Leonard: Well, I think that's really up to all of us. I have this idea, instead of calling them strategic lawsuits against public participation, I think we call them strategic lawsuits, amplifying public participation. And any organization or activist who is slapped, we all go and stand with them. What if when a company SLAPPed an activist or an organization, that was an automatic 10 x of that campaign. So this is where we need to have solidarity, we need –

Kousha Navidar: How does that work?

Annie Leonard: Well, actually, when these first SLAPP suits came, a bunch of us started a coalition called Protect the Protest, and the slogan is, an attack on one is an attack on all. And when any one of us gets SLAPPed, we all join in. But you know what these companies do? They are so sneaky. The lawsuit against Greenpeace was against Greenpeace and John and Jane Doe one through 20. And what that is, is they're holding a space to add you if you piss them off. And so in, and then they got discovery. So they got to go all through. I had to give them my telephone and notebooks and computer for 24 hours. That was really terrible. So they go through and try to find anybody that in any way participated and they add you. So it is, um. Chilling in a lot of ways, but I'm encouraging Greenpeace to reframe it is, um, Greenpeace is a 501 C3 and a 5 0 1 C 4.

The only thing that Energy Transfers can take away from them is their bank account and their corporate structure. That's the least valuable asset Greenpeace has. You know, Greenpeace is an orientation of the spirit. Greenpeace is what you feel in your gut when you look at your daughter or granddaughter and you promise her a better future. They can't take that away. They, there's no way they can silence that. So I just said, let the bank account go. Who cares? I mean, Greenpeace actually has a policy to not have more than three months operating expenses in the bank at any time, anywhere in the world, which is nervous making if you're an executive director.

Kousha Navidar: Sorry, that's Yeah.

Annie Leonard: It's nervous making. Yeah, but then it's like, okay, so we got sued. Oops, sorry. Um, so I'm telling Greenpeace. When you have your press conference that says you declare bankruptcy, then switch your hats and say, and we'd like to introduce you to our new organization, you know, Greenpeace 2.0 or whatever. Just so what, lose the corporate structure. We all know corporations aren't people. You can't actually silence what Greenpeace is in the heart.

Kousha Navidar: So what I hear you saying, I think this leads to the last question I wanted to ask you then, because what I hear you talking about is a focus less on the meta structure of a corporation or a brand individual active connection between people. So as an individual what is the most important thing to be thinking about to protect the right to protest.

Annie Leonard: Well, the most important thing is don't be alone. Find some other friends who wanna do this with you. That is the single most important thing if you wanna get involved in this. Yeah. And the subtitle of the book was very, um, specific. It's very literal. We want people to respect protest. When you hear narratives that protestors are terrorists, that they hate America, that their troublemakers remind them of the long, righteous democratic arc of protest in this country. So push back on the narrow, on the vilification and demonization of protestors. That's to respect it. The second is defend it. Write to your Congress members and tell, and to your state legislature. There's so many states that are considering anti protest laws or have already passed them. So really write to your legislators and say that the First Amendment, free speech and peaceful assembly is absolutely core to a democracy. So defend it. And the main way that we defend it is by using it. We protect free speech by speaking. We protect peaceful assembly by peacefully assembling. And then we need more protests now, not less.

Kousha Navidar: Annie Leonard is an environmental activist and author of “Protest: Respect It, Defend It, Use it. Annie, it's such a pleasure. Thank you so much.

Annie Leonard: Thank you. Appreciate it.

Kousha Navidar: Protest can be effective but it isn't the only way to make change. Danielle Lee knows about this firsthand. After studying engineering at Stanford she founded the Climate Action Club. Lee says the club “builds the in-person relational infrastructure Gen Z craves and it helps young people process climate anxiety and understand systemic change and their place in it.” So I asked her, what’s a typical meeting like?

Danielle Lee: It depends on the kind of gathering we're hosting, but we typically either, you know, have a potluck at a picnic, at a park, or we'll have a dinner party, or we'll do something fun where the stakes feel kind of low and you just wanna show up and meet people and make friends. We really try to make it chill and not feel like something that like, oh, as soon as I come to one thing it means I need to sign up to all these other, you know, tasks and have all these asks of me. Um, so we really try to ground it in community and really just like making friends.

Kousha Navidar: When I'm at the event, what am I doing? Like what's the agenda generally?

Danielle Lee: Yeah. So it depends on kind of event we have, but, um, either we'll have someone come and speak and we'll, you know, listen to them talk, and then we'll have, you know, small discussion groups and people will share, you know, their thoughts, reflections, questions, or we'll listen to a podcast, uh, or read –

Kousha Navidar: Which one, which podcast you listen to?

Danielle Lee: Only only climate one. Of course. Um, uh, listen to a podcast or read a substack and then have time for people to reflect and discuss in kind of small groups. We try to focus a lot, not just on like one-to-many conversations where we have like one person kind of sharing a message, but also many to many because that's really where people feel like they can, share their thoughts and their feelings and how they're, you know, thinking through things. And then also, just really be part of the community and the broader movement.

Kousha Navidar: Mm. Personally as somebody who I, I am, I'm now considered like a younger person, but not a young person anymore. So, um, do younger people still care about protesting or is it different than it used to be?

Danielle Lee: I, I think. People definitely still do care. I think that there's just like a really big, like cultural and like social norm where, you know, doing these things may not be as, as commonplace as maybe it was 10 or 20 years ago for past generations. And I guess like maybe a clear example that comes to mind for me is like, has been like the, the immigrant protests or the, um, the No Kings protests and how, uh. I was pretty, uh, maybe a little disappointed to see a lack of representation amongst 20, 30-year-old working people. 'cause that's a key part of the demographic of folks that need to be, uh, involved and engaged in this kind of work. and I think it also too can feel very, uh, disappointing and sad and frustrating when you're in this and you're like, why isn't everyone else like freaking out as much as I am? Um, but I think the, I think that the reframe is really that it's an opportunity to engage more people and create these on-ramps for people feel more comfortable and invite their friends and then their friends will invite their friends and so on.

Kousha Navidar: It's interesting because when you first started talking about an average meeting, the first thing that you said is, this is chill. Come on in, it’s a potluck. Is that part of the strategy?

Danielle Lee: I would say it is just because we want it to be, like a lot of people who come to our, like one of our hangouts or meetings, it's their first time or one of the few times that they have to really discuss these broader social issues, environmental issues, what have you, that they feel like their friends or people like their coworkers are not going to engage with in the same way that they want to. And so we've seen so many people come and be like, I've felt like I've been going crazy. And it's been so nice to have a place where I can meet other people who agree that these issues are really big and that we need to be talking about them more. And we also need to be like, in those conversations, we need to be, figuring out how we respond and do so collectively

Kousha Navidar: I wanna know a little bit more about you too. 'cause you went from engineering at Stanford, right? Right. Yeah.

Danielle Lee: Yeah.

Kousha Navidar: at Stanford, and then you went from that to becoming a product manager at, at a climate tech startup to founding a nonprofit. So what was the moment for you when, when you felt like building community was what you wanted to focus on versus building a product?

Danielle Lee: I think it, it was, it was sort of like a, a period of, of really, uh, I guess feeling courageous enough to ask these difficult questions and contemplate the real answers behind them. Like, for example, are these technological solutions that we are lauding and kind of calling the future of society actually going to be solving these really complex problems like the climate crisis? And then thinking through all of the other questions that go behind that too, like how has our, you know, social, political, economic systems been structured in such a way where, you know, we are perpetuating or almost causing these problems. Right. and you know, over time as I've kind of settled into like honest, uh, facts around that, I became, uh, just more compelled to explore what other things I could do to just make a small dent in affecting some of the change I wanted to see. and I think on the community side of things, I definitely was one of those people that felt like I was going crazy. Like, you know, having like my great friends who are, who are wonderful but didn't care as much about climate issues or social issues as I did. Or coworkers who, you know, I was working in climate tech and they also didn't have answers to these big questions that I was asking. 'cause I did ask them. and so I realized that having a space where people, peers, and like friends could come together to meet new people and also have these discussions was very, very much lacking. So I just

decided to move forth. Yeah.

Kousha Navidar: the word that you used that stuck out the most to me was courageous. Mm-hmm. You said you felt more courageous, right? Mm-hmm. did that courage come?

Danielle Lee: I think, um, I didn't really grow up as someone who would like question and challenge all these different things. I felt like I, like listened to my parents. My mom's actually here, so I'm looking at her. Um, I like listened to my parents and I sort of like did what I was told and kind of did, went through the steps of, you know, working really hard in school, getting into a good college, doing all of that, finding a good job. and so I think that the courage piece was really more rooted in not wanting to be dishonest about the truth. And I think a lot of what we are, uh, brought up in, in our society today is grounded in things that are maybe half truths or not fully contextualizing the externalities or kind of maybe the bad things that come along with all these amazing, you know, leaps in innovation and progress. and so I think it was, yeah, just wanting to be honest with myself, and, uh, also really wanting to reject the notion that technology is gonna solve all the problems. 'cause it just really isn't. Um, if you think about it long enough, it becomes super clear.

Kousha Navidar: There's a tension in the climate movement between individual action and systemic uh, in a room full of young that are who are trying to figure out their place in it. What do you tell them when they want to do something but they powerless against forces that are much larger

Danielle Lee: Yeah. I think about individual action versus systemic change all the time. And we talk about it all the time. I think it's been interesting to see different people's responses to that because some people feel really comfortable with the individual action piece, and they'll make really, like, arguably pretty, you know, dramatic lifestyle changes to kind of do all the things and check all the boxes. And I think what I like to, you know, talk about with those kinds of folks is do that and do it with a bunch of other people. Like invite, like all your friends to also start participating and engaging in, in that kind of work, whether it's around plant-based eating or, or, or you know, transit and all that. Um, and then I think what Climate Action Club as like a community really wants to focus on is collective action. So more focusing on these, you know, small things that we do that are aimed at the bigger systemic changes. I think also being realistic around like what we can accomplish is important, but maintaining lots of hope that what we do makes a difference is, is essential because there's so much apathy amongst young people and not, not just young people who care about, you know, the climate crisis. Just young people in general, and also maybe just people in general. So much apathy.

Kousha Navidar: I wonder. Yeah, yeah,

Danielle Lee: So much apathy that leaves people stuck and you can't do anything when you're apathetic and depressed.

Kousha Navidar: Does anyone ever show up to the meeting and you feel like they're apathetic and they came there for a different reason? Like, does everyone that show up, are they already on board or do you need to get them to care ever?

Danielle Lee: Um, there's definitely people who come in and are apathetic, like very aware of these problems. These like really big systemic problems. And then also, like, there's nothing we can do. So, but I'm just, I'm still here to talk about it. Uh, which I think is funny.

Kousha Navidar: I feel like that might be a lot of people where they're like, yeah, I see what's going on, but what do you want me to do? I'm not gonna, there's, I've gotta pay my bills, et cetera.

Danielle Lee: Yeah. And I think that's why it's been really exciting over the last, you know, several months for us to start engaging with more like local advocacy work is that, we're not saying, Hey, this, you know, one ballot measure is gonna solve all these problems, but it will solve a very specific, defined problem in the community that people are like either going to be harmed by or feel like they have a stake in. One example is just the, the transit cuts in the Bay Area. Bay Area transit is in very dire straits. And so we've been working with this like transit coalition to help collect signatures for a ballot measure that's gonna, you know, hopefully make it on the ballot in November. And that's been something that people have been super, super excited about because the call's very clear. It's like, Hey, you will not have access to the bus that you rely on to get to work at this time, if this does not happen. And so I think, just giving people very concrete ways and easy, accessible ways that people can get involved.

Kousha Navidar: Scaffolding is what you're talking about. Yeah. Start off with, uh, bringing something to a potluck. From there and kind of meet people where they are.

Danielle Lee: Exactly.

Kousha Navidar: Um, and you know, I really appreciated how you, you started saying young people are apathetic. Maybe everybody's apathetic because it's so easy to, to truncate based on age, but like, people are people, right? Yeah. So, I'm, I'm guessing, just as somebody who works in fostering climate community, what is something that you think people of any age do that is most efficacious?

Danielle Lee: I mean, there's so many things, but the one that's on my mind right now is just knowing and becoming friends with your neighbors. Knowing the people that live in the local community you're in is a huge thing that we've lost in society. and I think, uh, it's also a really big way of climate resilience. The people who are most likely to survive any sort of crisis are the people who know their neighbors most, um, and are able to connect with, you know, different resources when bad things occur. I would say that's a really important thing that I think anyone at any age

Kousha Navidar: That really strikes me because everybody has a neighbor. Yeah. Danielle Lee is founder of the Climate Action Club. Thank you so much for joining us.

Music: in

Kousha Navidar: Coming up, a young city council member says local politics offers a powerful avenue to create change:

James Coleman: And we have to make sure that we are contesting every single election, ensuring that we have champions, champions on, on affordability, on housing, on on climate, who aren't gonna take any money from oil companies, making sure they have a chance and a shot at securing that governing power.

Kousha Navidar: That's up next, when Climate One continues.

Music: out

Ariana Brocious: This is Climate One. I'm Ariana Brocious. So far we've talked about protest and community building/civic engagement as tools to make change. Another avenue for change making is serving in public office. James Coleman became the youngest member of the South San Francisco City Council, running for the office while still an undergraduate. Six years in, he continues to champion climate legislation on a local and regional level. He spoke with Kousha during our live event with Danielle Lee and Annie Leonard at the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco.

Kousha Navidar: So before running for office even, you co-founded Harvard Undergraduates for Environmental Justice and you helped push Harvard to divest $40 billion of their endowment in fossil fuels, right?

James Coleman: Yes.

Kousha Navidar: So what did winning that campaign teach you about how institutional change actually happens?

James Coleman: Yeah, it, it taught me the importance of coalition building in, in any sort of campaign and the fossil fuel divestment campaign. I mean, it wasn't just. My group of students at Harvard, it was, it was several groups over the course of almost a decade, a campaign that started in 2013, and then they had a little win where the college paused, additional investments in fossil fuel industry. And instead the campaign stalled for a little bit, but then they came back in 2018 and eventually won in 2021, 2022. Um, and it was a coalition of students, of alumni, of faculty, uh, of parents, and of the, the labor unions that represented, uh, some of the Harvard faculty as well.

Kousha Navidar: What did you learn about coalition building?

James Coleman: I learned you need everyone. You need everyone on board as as many as you can because if it was just a group of students asking for it, I know that the, the university wouldn't have have done. So it, it required faculty, alumni. And there are some alumni who said, look, we're going to pause our donations to the university unless you divest. Right. And it takes putting political pressure at all points in, in order to enact change.

Kousha Navidar: Yeah. Uh, Annie and Danielle were both talking about all of that activism or protest or things in the protest ecosystem can look. And I think you have such an interesting story because you went from being an activist on the outside to now a policy maker on the inside. Right. And I want to know about that moment that you made that choice. Like what made you turn to elected office as your path to affecting change?

James Coleman: I, I'd always see myself as an activist and I still consider myself an organizer. Sure. but what really happened is, you know, in 2020 , our college was the first to evacuate our entire campus. And so I came back home to South San Francisco where I was born and raised, and 2020 was a hectic year. You had COVID wreaking havoc on people's healthcare education and housing systems. You had the, the movement for black lives. You had the rise in anti-Asian hate. You had that orange morning on October where people woke up and the skies were orange straight, like it was a, a scene outta Blade Runner. And, a lot of local, young people went to city council meetings for the first time in our lives, uh, advocating for resources, advocating for change and reform.

Kousha Navidar: And what was that, you?

James Coleman:I was one of 'em, yes. and what happened is the. Former mayor decided to shut down public comment using the COVID pandemic as an excuse to shut down public engagement. 'cause you know, they didn't wanna hear from us young people. and when that happened, we knew we had to hold our elected leaders accountable. This was the first year that, I mean, us we're so close to San Francisco to where if you wanna go to a protest, you go to the city. Right? Right. But this was the first year that I had seen students, community members, people march on the streets of South San Francisco, March to City Hall, have, you know, hundreds of public commenters attempting to give public comments. Some of them did, but, but later down the line, many of them were blocked. and we couldn't find anyone to run. And I remember being in the living room with, with one of my friends, and we thought, oh shoot, it's, it's me, Oh shoot, it's me. But, and, and, and

so we decided to, you know, announce a, a grassroots campaign. I was running, you know, tale of two extremes. We had a 78-year-old incumbent, and then a 21-year-old, uh, guy out of nowhere. Right. Uh, but it

Kousha Navidar: from the community, to be fair, but yeah, yeah, yeah,

James Coleman: But it was a campaign that was run by high school students and community college students. And, and we made Thank you. And we made, um, tens of thousands of phone calls. We, we lit dropped every door in the district three times.

Kousha Navidar: You visited every door in the district?

James Coleman: Three times. Um, and through that grassroots campaign, we were able to win. And I became the city's youngest ever, but also first openly L-G-B-T-Q, council member in the city's history.

Kousha Navidar: It's a great story. My question was what made you want to do it? What, what you look to your left and to your right. Why not the person to your left or the person to your right?

James Coleman: Um, I mean, there's a few reasons. One, it was. Yeah, it was the first year that this election would be on an even year. It was the first year it was by district. It was a year where there was an incredible amount of energy in the community. Um, and so I saw that there was a clear path to victory, but also I was fed up with the status quo. Mm-hmm. Right. 2020 was a year where, and I see many parallels to this year where you have many levels of government, um, not responding to the needs of the community and that there needed to be some change. Mm-hmm. and injustice is one of the things that inspires me to, to take action. Um, there's this concept called rage canvassing, where, where something makes you really upset and you're like, okay, I'm gonna go talk to people. Yeah, yeah. I'm gonna make some phone calls. I'm gonna knock some doors. I'm gonna talk to community and channel that anger into actionable change.

Kousha Navidar: Rage canvassing! See you later. Looks-maxxing. Rage canvassing is what's in. Uh, let's talk about federal climate policy since you mentioned all these different layers of, of, of government, federal climate policy is being rolled back. Right. How much can a city council reasonably do in that context?

James Coleman: A lot, a lot. So much is, you know, there's so much attention on the federal government, but really what makes the most impact in people's lives is local government. Sure. And when our city did our climate action plan, and we kind of research into, you know, where are emissions coming from? It's one buildings and two transportation. And those are the two places where the local government has most impact. And of course, you know, when the federal government had their build back better plan and the infrastructure bill, I mean, that, that did bring in billions and billions of dollars, uh, to, to local governments to use from. But, uh, one thing that our cities can do is reach codes, right? And what reach codes are, is that their local building codes that reach beyond the state building code. And so we can say, look, when you are building a new building, whether it be housing or a large corporate office building, it should be all electric and not use any fossil fuels.

Kousha Navidar: Aspirational, kind of.

James Coleman: Yes. Uh, and we do that in South San Francisco. Mm. And the second thing is transportation. Right. And I'm glad Danielle talked about the, the regional, uh, transit measure. If, if BART and Caltrain and Muni fail, how many cars on that road is that gonna impact? Right? Right.

How many more vehicle miles traveled? How much more emissions? And so we shouldn't have people driving two hours to get to work. We should have a reliable public transit and the availability of safe bike and pedestrian infrastructure for people to get from point A to point B.

Kousha Navidar: It is aspirational. And I completely agree with the idea of, you know, you're talking about building, you're talking about transportation, city councils where it happens. Uh, I'm gonna push back just a little bit. Like, is there a ceiling to what you can actually accomplish when there is no support from the federal level?

James Coleman: There's definitely a ceiling. Okay. Um, because buildings and transportation infrastructure is not cheap. And so oftentimes we do need regional boards. We need the states, and we do need the federal government to come in with the dollars to make us have the most impact in our policies.

Kousha Navidar: How do you compare the efficacy of working from the outside as an organizer, like the way you were in college to, to working from the inside now as an elected. Same frustrations, different frustrations, bigger wins, different feeling?

James Coleman: So patience is a virtue, but not that, not one that I have. And I, you know, I, I still see myself as both an organizer and, and, you know, an, an insider I guess. but it's, you know, things move slowly.

Kousha Navidar: Yeah.

James Coleman: In all levels of government. And oftentimes you need to hold our elected leaders' feet to the flame, and we need activists who will go to city council meetings, who will give public comments, who will send us emails and, and leave us voicemails and messages to inspire action. Because even here, you know, in a, in a very blue area, which is the Bay Area, there are elected officials who they do believe in climate change, right? They do believe it's an issue, but there are, are they willing to have the courage to move as quick as they possibly can.

Kousha Navidar: Mm.

James Coleman: And, we need activists on the ground who are demanding action and better policy from their elected officials.

Kousha Navidar: I want to ask you more question then I want to open it up and, and, um, ask a few things to all of you, but how has your perspective changed on how to impact change itself since you were in college?

James Coleman: I feel like many activists look at government with distrust. Um, and many are, are very skeptical of those in power. But what I've come to learn is government is not the problem, it is the prize. And we have to, as activists, secure governing power in order to enact the policies and, and, and the change that we all are envisioning. And so I want to see many more activists who do have the knowledge, who do have the experience, who have the vision and the passion for the issues. I want to see them run for city councils and school boards and state legislatures as well. And what we see so often is, you know, especially in San Mateo County, right, where there are so many small and medium sized cities and they're then, they're even in broken part, even smaller and in districts. Oftentimes there aren't competitive elections,

Kousha Navidar: Mm-hmm.

James Coleman: and we have to make sure that we are contesting every single election, ensuring

that we have champions, champions on, on affordability, on housing, on on climate, who aren't gonna take any money from oil companies, making sure they have a chance and a shot at securing that governing power really quickly.

Kousha Navidar: Did the way that you trust government change since you got elected and now that you're an your perspective net sense changed for you?

James Coleman: It's possible. It, yes, yes, it's possible. Um, and you know it, when you look at Congress, you can feel very hopeless, right? Because there's so much gridlock, and the Senate with the filibuster, right, even more. But when you look at city councils, so many of these city councils locally in California are only five member bodies.

Kousha Navidar: Mm-hmm.

James Coleman: You only need to count to three and to flip a council seat. I mean, when I ran 2020, I raised $17,000, which is a lot less than the millions of dollars that members of Congress have to raise. Right? And so just a, just a handful of high school students and college students, they can make that impact. They can flip city council seats, they can give public comment and make changes that can affect thousands, if not tens of thousands of people in those jurisdictions.

Kousha Navidar: Mm. It gave you more faith, it sounds like, gave you more hope ways 'cause you actually saw it impact. I think that's really valuable. And I wanna bring Annie and Danielle back into this. So Annie, you've personally campaigned against international trade and hazardous waste. You led Green Peace US, you co launched a political action committee, and now you've written a book on protest. So you have an arc. And looking at that arc, what's the hardest lesson that you've learned about how change actually happens?

Annie Leonard: When I started out, when I was an activist in college, many, many years ago, I actually thought we were gonna win probably soon after I was out of college, but definitely in my lifetime. And, um, you know, you hear the, the too often, quoted line about when you're young, you think social change is a sprint. But when you're older you learn it's a marathon. And when you're even older you'll learn it's a relay race. And that, I think the hardest thing for me was to accept that we may not solve all of, we may not have an inclusive, multiracial democracy. We may not reign in corporate power. We may not solve the climate crisis in my lifetime, which is why I'm so happy to see people like this, who I feel so confident that I'll hand the baton to.

Kousha Navidar: And Danielle, sitting between Annie and James, what's your takeaway from this conversation? Are you gonna bring anything back from this to the Climate Action Club

Danielle Lee: Definitely. I, I think that the patience piece that both of you brought up is huge. Um, and something I struggle a lot with as well. 'cause I'm super impatient. I want things to happen very instantaneously. And I think we live in a world with instant gratification too, right? So how can we, our minds not be programmed to want that. but with social change, cultural change, political change, these things just take a long time. And that doesn't mean that we should notry and, and do things and, and move things forward and do as much as we can. But I think also recognizing that the time horizons for some of these larger social, changes that we wanna bring to life are, are gonna take a lot of time. And patience is Yeah. That we must learn.

James Coleman: We must learn.

Kousha Navidar: For me, do any of you have advice on how to be a more patient person? 'cause I feel like I could do this too. Like if any of you, what, how do you develop those skills maybe to look at

a longer time horizon and keep the faith as things get hard, I'll open up to anybody.

Annie Leonard: Can I say it's a conundrum? Because often two truths can exist at the same time. That yes, we have to be patient and recognize the long arc of social change, and we have an enormous sense of urgency and you have to be able to hold them both at the same time. One time I was asking Peter Senge, who's a very famous systems thinker about the climate crisis, and I was coming with my like ramped up Urgent, urgent, urgent. And he said, Annie, the climate crisis is so urgent that we don't have time to rush. And that I really thought about that. That was so interesting. So we have to be able to hold them both the sense of urgency. We know what the science says. This is, this is the most critical time of human humanity ever right now, these years. And also, we're not gonna win everything tomorrow, how to hold them both.

Kousha Navidar: How to hold them both, and how to find the people that can help you hold them at the same time.

Annie Leonard: And take care of yourself. Walk in the forest, meditate, listen to music, dance, laugh, you know, take care of yourself.

Kousha Navidar: Annie, Danielle, and James. Thank you all for such an engaging conversation. I really appreciate it.

James Coleman: Thank you.

Annie Leonard: Thank you.

Danielle Lee: Thank you.

Music: In

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Ariana Brocious: Climate One is a production of the Commonwealth Club. Our team includes Brad Marshland, Jenny Park, Austin Colón, Megan Biscieglia, Kousha Navidar and Rachael Lacey. Our theme music is by George Young. I’m Ariana Brocious.

Music: Out