

## 2014 Greenfield Peace Writing Scholarship Entry #108

### Be the Change You Wish To See

I stood in front of the gathering of peace activists, teachers, and students, a rush of empowerment coursing through my body. Some fellow high school students and I had organized an anti-war rally to raise awareness for the disparity between federal military spending and government education spending. I began to speak, and as my criticisms of the American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan registered with the crowd, I felt that my voice was being heard. My words reflected in the eyes of the people who had come together to move towards a better earth. In a conflict-ridden and environmentally imbalanced world, young people everywhere have both an innate power and duty to take an active role in securing a nonviolent and renewable future.

What are young people up against? Both war and climate change pose dire threats to the health and sustainability of today's world. In the Iraq war alone, an estimated 121,728 – 135,100 civilians have died.<sup>1</sup> Also, “the US federal price tag for the Iraq war [...] is about \$2.2 trillion dollars”,<sup>2</sup> despite the fact that “[...] nearly 49 million Americans [...] struggle to put food on the table”.<sup>3</sup> The use of nuclear weapons in warfare allows “toxic substances [to] seep into the ground (rendering the soil unsafe), disperse through the air (spreading wide-scale pollution), and taint water and food supplies”.<sup>4</sup> Due to climate change itself, “glaciers have shrunk, ice on rivers and lakes is breaking up earlier, plant and animal ranges have shifted and trees are flowering sooner”.<sup>5</sup>

However, there is great potential for young people to make positive change. By communicating with political representatives and raising awareness for anti-war movements through public protests, young people can work towards a more peaceful world. As “small changes in our everyday lives can make a big difference”,<sup>6</sup> young people can reduce carbon emissions with techniques like “walk[ing] or bik[ing] instead of

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<sup>1</sup> "Iraq Body Count." *Iraq Body Count*. Iraq Body Count, n.d. Web. 06 Mar. 2014. <<https://www.iraqbodycount.org/>>.

<sup>2</sup> "Costs of War." *Costs of War*. N.p., n.d. Web. 06 Mar. 2014. <<http://costsofwar.org/>>.

<sup>3</sup> "U.S. Hunger." *www.bread.org*. N.p., n.d. Web. 06 Mar. 2014. <<http://www.bread.org/hunger/us/>>.

<sup>4</sup> "The Environmental Consequences of War." *www.sierraclub.ca*. The Sierra Club, n.d. Web. 05 Mar. 2014. <<http://www.sierraclub.ca/national/postings/war-and-environment.html>>.

<sup>5</sup> "Effects." Global Climate Change. *climate.gov.nasa*, n.d. Web. 05 Mar. 2014. <<http://climate.nasa.gov/effects>>.

<sup>6</sup> "Tips from a Nature Conservancy Scientist, The Nature Conservancy." *www.nature.org*. The Nature Conservancy, n.d. Web. 04 Mar. 2014. <<http://www.nature.org/ourinitiatives/urgentissues/global-warming-climate-change/help/tips-from-a-nature-conservancy-scientist.xml>>.

driving a car”,<sup>7</sup> and advocating “for strong laws to curb global warming and put America on a path to clean energy”.<sup>8</sup>

An example of the power of young people to initiate change is shown in the eighth-grader Alec Loorz’s Sea Level Awareness Project. After watching *An Inconvenient Truth*, Loorz took action to “dig deep holes and install tall poles [...] along the coast [...] to get people to visualize [that] these areas will be underwater if sea levels continue to rise”.<sup>9</sup> Loorz went on to sue the federal government under the ‘public trust doctrine’, which states that the U.S. government has a “sovereign obligation over all the earth and air within its domain”.<sup>10</sup> With a group of passionate young sustainability advocates all over the United States, Loorz and his fellow activists have taken concrete steps to demand the reduction of national carbon emissions. Similar action had been taken in the early 1990’s when an “environmental attorney [...] represented 43 children in a class action suit to defend [the Philippines’] small vestige of old-growth forest from logging firms”.<sup>11</sup> This “children’s case [...] was ultimately upheld by the Philippines’ Supreme Court, inspiring similar suits throughout the world”.<sup>12</sup> Supporters of the Loorz suit “believe that having kids as plaintiffs makes a particularly visceral appeal to adults to take action, [and] many of the adults involved said that their own children and grandchildren had inspired them”.<sup>13</sup>

By taking similar large-scale youth-dominated actions, and perhaps combining with other activists across the globe, young people can take definitive action to make the world a better place. As Mahatma Gandhi once said, “in a gentle way, you can shake the world.”

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<sup>7</sup> “Tips from a Nature Conservancy Scientist, The Nature Conservancy.” *www.nature.org*. The Nature Conservancy, n.d. Web. 04 Mar. 2014. <<http://www.nature.org/ourinitiatives/urgentissues/global-warming-climate-change/help/tips-from-a-nature-conservancy-scientist.xml>>.

<sup>8</sup> “Stopping Global Warming.” *www.greenpeace.org*. Greenpeace, n.d. Web. 06 Mar. 2014. <<http://www.greenpeace.org/usa/en/campaigns/global-warming-and-energy/>>.

<sup>9</sup> “Youth Activism Project » Success Stories.” *youthactivismproject.org*. Youth Activism Project, n.d. Web. 06 Mar. 2014. <<http://youthactivismproject.org/success-stories/>>.

<sup>10</sup> “Our Children’s Trust.” *ourchildrenstrust.org*. Our Children’s Trust, n.d. Web. 06 Mar. 2014. <<http://ourchildrenstrust.org/trust-films?page=1>>.

<sup>11</sup> Ellison, Katherine. “An Inconvenient Lawsuit: Teenagers Take Global Warming to the Courts.” *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, 09 May 2012. Web. 06 Mar. 2014. <<http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2012/05/an-inconvenient-lawsuit-teenagers-take-global-warming-to-the-courts/256903/>>.

<sup>12</sup> Ellison, Katherine. “An Inconvenient Lawsuit: Teenagers Take Global Warming to the Courts.” *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, 09 May 2012. Web. 06 Mar. 2014. <<http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2012/05/an-inconvenient-lawsuit-teenagers-take-global-warming-to-the-courts/256903/>>.

<sup>13</sup> Ellison, Katherine. “An Inconvenient Lawsuit: Teenagers Take Global Warming to the Courts.” *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, 09 May 2012. Web. 06 Mar. 2014. <<http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2012/05/an-inconvenient-lawsuit-teenagers-take-global-warming-to-the-courts/256903/>>.