

The Teenagers at the End of the World

By Brooke Jarvis
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Jamie Margolin in her bedroom. Holly Andres for The New York Times

In February, Jamie Margolin gave a talk at the Seattle middle school from which she graduated just a few years before. As a founder of Zero Hour, a youth-led group advocating for climate action, she does a lot of public speaking — in a few days, she would help warm up a crowd of 17,000 for Bernie Sanders — but her talks with younger children are special. She often feels, she says, as if she’s speaking to her former self. She always starts with an apology: “I know this is unfair. I wish the future could be better than this.” And then she ends by telling kids that they, too, have the

power to take action. Before becoming an activist, she tells them, “I was sitting in your seats, not knowing what to do.”

Her message, about the scary realities of climate change and the need to do something about them, is a big one for children to take in. One fifth grader, teary-eyed, asked her, “Do you think we’re going to make it?” But Margolin thinks that young people, armed with information and outrage, have a unique role to play in combating the environmental crises that will define their lives. One middle-school student at the event raised a hand to ask why polluting the earth, because it’s so dangerous and so unfair, isn’t illegal, which struck her as a pretty reasonable question. Children, she told me, “think about it in a logical way that’s more scientific than adults with Ph.D.s. Adults, they go into a whole explanation, but kids will just be like, This is wrong.”

Now 18, Margolin has been helping run a large organization for years. The Zero Hour Slack group, where leadership and core organizers communicate, has more than 100 members. She has met with politicians and celebrities, helped plan international protests from her high school and joined a group of children suing her home state, Washington, for violating their constitutional rights by contributing to climate change. She has seen change be slow and disappointing and watched herself become more jaded, more aware of the impediments to the kinds of transformation she is seeking. To be a teenager in the climate movement is to balance innocence and pragmatism, to inhabit a strange but also deeply useful dual perspective. “I’m not like, What are taxes?” she said. “I’m not that young.” But she’s also able to hear the question from the middle schooler and imagine that the world could still be different, to think: You know what? You’re absolutely right. It should, and even could, be illegal.

“I still have the outrage,” she said. “It’s not like I’m 40.”

When I first met Margolin, on a rare day of winter sun in Seattle, it had been three weeks since a resident of the county just north of the city became among the first Americans to test positive for a new virus circulating in China. That threat still felt far off, theoretical, and we focused instead on the one that defined Margolin's adolescence. Wearing a purple winter coat that brought out the dyed magenta streaks in her hair, she ate Valentine's-themed cookies at the bakery near her high school and tried to explain what it's like to grow up in the shadow of worldwide environmental destabilization. The defining feeling of her generation, she said, is "not really believing in the future."

Margolin arrived from school with an empty lunch bag and a stuffed backpack. Occasionally, she paused to answer messages on her phone: Zero Hour was hiring fellows to do voter-turnout work in Philadelphia, and she needed to approve the language of the ads before they went out. The mundane interruptions made it feel awkward to ask about grief and anxiety and fear, but Margolin shrugged. It was pretending that everything was fine when it clearly wasn't that she found exhausting, she said.

When adults ask her, as they often do, when she first became worried about climate change, Margolin has a go-to answer: Climate change, she explains, is like Beyoncé. When you're a member of her generation, both are facts of life, things you just know, fundamental to the way the world functions. "There was definitely a time when I first heard of climate change," Margolin told me, just as she "wasn't birthed knowing about Beyoncé." But in neither case can she remember a moment of first awareness. For her and her peers, Beyoncé has simply always existed. And so has the fear of growing up and making a life in a world rendered unrecognizable by climate change.

Then came Hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria, which hit in 2017, the same summer Seattle was choking on wildfire smoke so thick it turned the sun red, blotting out even nearby buildings and sending people to the hospital. For Margolin, the world suddenly seemed more dangerous, the future less stable, the people in charge far less capable. She began to wonder what she could do about it. By the next year, when she was 16, she and other organizers she met online were leading their first international climate protest.

Last month, Margolin published a guidebook, “Youth to Power: Your Voice and How to Use It.” In the foreword, the Swedish activist Greta Thunberg writes that it took getting involved with Margolin and the Zero Hour marches in 2018 to realize that she wasn’t alone in being deeply worried about what was happening to the planet on which she still had her entire life to live. As she met more young people through her activism, Thunberg writes, she began to see that, the world over, many in her generation shared her anger and despair. They just didn’t know what to do with those feelings.



Margolin with the climate activist Greta Thunberg in September, during a joint hearing before congressional committees at the Rayburn House Office Building in Washington. Alastair Pike/Agence France-Presse, via Getty Images

Young people have been frustrated about the world’s inaction on climate change long enough for there to be former “youth climate activists” with gray hair and children of their own. In the last couple of years, however, in part because of the sudden celebrity of Thunberg, the role has become something of an archetype, a phenomenon underscored by the arrival of the 19-year-old German climate-change denier Naomi Seibt, who was pitched by the conservative Heartland Institute as an anti-Greta — a comic-book counterpoint, like Captain Pollution or Superman’s nemesis Bizarro. (Seibt reportedly left the institute in April.) The contours of the backlash, too, have become familiar: Critics argue that young people are manipulated by adults; that they put on a nice show but have accomplished very little; that their fears are hysterical and their demands extreme. Last winter, when Thunberg was selected as Time magazine’s “person of the year,” President Trump responded to her message of urgency with smug

dismissal. “Greta must work on her Anger Management problem,” he wrote on Twitter, “then go to a good old-fashioned movie with a friend! Chill Greta, Chill!” Margolin’s answer to this sort of criticism is that she would love, very much, to chill; there are any number of things she would rather be doing, if only adults would make that possible by running the world more responsibly. And isn’t it a bit rich to criticize a bunch of teenagers for what they’ve accomplished, when they’re going up against a well-funded fossil-fuel industry from their bedrooms and homerooms, all before being old enough to vote? And wouldn’t you be angry, too, if the generations before you built and benefited from an unjust and unsustainable system and then left you to deal with the mess when it started to break down? Wouldn’t you, like Thunberg, want to stand up before the people who were supposed to be looking out for you and the world you’d someday inherit and demand to know, with fire in your eyes, How dare you?

It’s difficult to measure the success of any activist movement. For years, Black Lives Matter, with its call to stop police violence against Black people, had more detractors than supporters. Through organizing and education, approval of the movement grew slowly but steadily, before skyrocketing after the killing of George Floyd. Within two weeks, reforms that seemed next to impossible began to feel inevitable.

Last fall’s explosion of youth climate marches, school walkouts and media coverage of youth activism followed a similar, if less spectacular, course. Climate change, which went unmentioned during the 2012 presidential debates and received less than six minutes of airtime when Trump and Hillary Clinton debated, became a major issue during the 2020 primary season. Candidates’ climate proposals became far more ambitious than they were just a few years before — though still short of what science tells us is needed. “So what has changed between then and now?” the historian Thai Jones asked ABC News. “The answer is activism.”



Margolin at a rally in New York City last September. Brittainy Newman/The New York Times

Yet many youth climate activists feel that their work is still misunderstood: A diverse movement with dispersed leadership and a complex critique of the racial and economic injustice of climate change gets boiled down to just a few faces and slogans. Margolin has watched Thunberg purposefully avoid giving speeches, trying to pass the microphone to other young activists from parts of the world hard hit by the climate crisis, only to see the media quote Thunberg's quick comments instead of her peers' carefully written statements. When The Associated Press cropped the Ugandan activist Vanessa Nakate out of a photo taken at the World Economic Forum in Davos, leaving only white activists in the frame, it was both infuriating and unsurprising. So is coverage that ignores the effort that goes into organizing and treats youth protests as a mere novelty. All this, too, Margolin finds exhausting. "The story shouldn't be, Oh, isn't it cute that these kids are standing up for something," she said. "It should be, What are they standing up *for*?"

One afternoon, I met Margolin at her bus stop after school. She had just taken an American-history exam but wasn't sure how she had done — she had been working on spreadsheets for an upcoming Zero Hour campaign way too late the night before, then woke up at 5:30, as she always did, to join a car pool to school. She had just stopped by the bakery again; the cute counter girl with the pink hair, on whom Margolin had the beginnings of a crush, was working, but Margolin felt too shy to say anything to her. She joked with a friend that she needed to find out when the counter girl was there, so she would know ahead of time whether it was worth making the effort to look cute. Today she was too tired. She had 345 unread emails, a Slack that was bursting with messages, a conference call with the Zero Hour leadership that afternoon and a growing backlog of homework. The bus pulled up, and she squeezed into a seat and leaned back. “Part of me feels like staging an angsty teenage getaway from my own life,” she said.

My joining Margolin on the bus was her idea. When I first called her and suggested covering what's behind the scenes of youth activism, she offered suggestions of what a photographer could shoot and what I might want to observe to see the work hidden behind the headlines about colorful street marches. I said I'd like to sit in on her conference calls with other organizers, and she said, If you're coming over, why not take the bus home with me so you can see me take calls and answer emails there? It was clear that I was in the hands of a person who had studied the media. I messaged another writer, impressed and amused that my teenage subject was stage-managing my interview.



Margolin talking with Al Gore at a climate crisis event last year. Erik McGregor/LightRocket, via Getty Images

On this day, though, Margolin felt too wiped to work on the bus. We got off downtown and then waited to switch to another bus, ducking into a sandwich shop to keep warm. By the time we got to her house, a modest wooden two-story in an outlying neighborhood, it was almost time for the call. In the kitchen, Margolin grabbed a handful of cookies and an apple-juice box — “I’m addicted to these things. They slap.” She paused to translate: “I mean, they’re good.” Then she logged into Zoom, which, in February, was still new to me. The screen showed a grid of teenagers: Zero Hour’s leaders and managers, who are spread out across the United States. “Did everyone get a chance to read through that obnoxiously long email that I sent?” asked Jonah Gottlieb, then 17. His organization, the National Children’s Campaign, was partnering with Zero Hour for an upcoming campaign. “This is going to be a grueling few weeks, and we have to be holding each other accountable.”

The project at hand was a six-city bus tour from New York to the Rust Belt, part of a project called #Vote4OurFuture, an effort to get young people involved in civic action. An added bonus might be renewed press attention for the youth movement as it showed it could organize on multiple levels — not just mass protest but also legislation, voter mobilization, local action. “People are getting tired of, Oh, kids are in the streets,” Margolin said. She wanted to offer a new narrative. Each city had point people assigned. There were logistics to plan, local partner organizations to connect with, news releases and graphics to prepare. A website, in the two organizations’ trademark colors, was already live. “When did you jam that out?” Margolin asked Gottlieb. “Last Friday,” he answered. “I was bored in history class.”

I watched as the array of organizers seamlessly pivoted between teenagehood and big-stakes action. As they ran through which national and regional climate organizations they had and hadn’t reached out to yet, the screens showed everybody sweatshirted, lounging around in bedrooms with posters on the walls. One director absent-mindedly braided her hair. When Margolin’s mother, Janeth, returned home from work, she didn’t want to interrupt the call, but Margolin pulled her in for an on-camera hug anyway.

“Do we have an official stance on offshore wind as an energy source?” someone asked, and a short discussion ensued. One teenage director briefly froze on their feed, and Margolin pointed out their awkward expression.

“That’s the first time Jamie’s not liked something that’s ‘Frozen’ themed,” Gottlieb said.

“Har har, har har,” Margolin replied.

Natalie Sweet, Zero Hour's communications director, who was then 16, had to leave early to speak to someone at N.Y.U. "Tell them to accept me to their school!"

Margolin pleaded, only half joking.

A lot of the young organizers with whom Margolin works have a story like hers: Some particular natural disaster or event made the future seem shakier and action more urgent. The October that Gottlieb was 15, he woke up at 3 in the morning because people fleeing from what was then the most destructive wildfire in California history were pounding on the door of his family's house. Over the next couple of years, a string of brutal fire seasons eclipsed that fire's distinction, and Gottlieb would become used to thinking of October as the season of smoke and school closures. Frustrated that his government wasn't dealing with the emissions that he saw as the root cause of the fires, he went to the office of his congressional representative to read what he had written while his house was still full of refugees and the air still filled with smoke. Soon he was doing advocacy days in Washington with Schools for Climate Action and then helping found the National Children's Campaign, a nonprofit that advocates for youth issues in Washington. Eventually Gottlieb estimated that he was spending 60 to 80 hours a week on his activism, typing out emails under his desk at school or taking calls during P.E. class.

"We all have our little place that we've carved out at school, and then we get home and work until 2 or 3 in the morning," he said. He alternated between the nurse's office and the school's front desk, while Margolin used the room where the drama department stored costumes. "That's just the youth-activist life."

In 2017, a report from the American Psychological Association included a new word, "ecoanxiety," which the A.P.A. defined as "a chronic fear of environmental doom." It

was only the latest in an emerging lexicon of life in the age of planetary disruption. The most famous of these neologisms is probably “solastalgia,” a word invented by the Australian philosopher Glenn Albrecht to describe the homesickness you feel for a place that you have not left but that has transformed beyond recognition around you. There’s also “shadowtime,” which “manifests as a feeling of living in two distinctly different temporal scales simultaneously, or acute consciousness of the possibility that the near future will be drastically different than the present.” That one was created by the Bureau of Linguistical Reality, a California-based conceptual-art project that works with the public to coin words for our disorienting new experiences. They also came up with “blissonance” (what you might feel while enjoying a pleasantly warm day in winter but wondering what unpleasant things it bodes about the future) and “jestope” (an attitude of hope mixed with cleareyed honesty about difficult realities).

To be a teenager in this moment is, to put it teenagerly, a lot. You’re supposed to be planning for your future at a time when it’s scary to imagine what that future will be. Models that predict world-changing sea-level rise and droughts and wildfires and ocean acidification tend to use dates that feel very real to you: 2030, when you might be starting to have children; 2050, when you might be reaching middle age. Other generations, like those practicing duck-and-cover under their desks or facing a wartime draft, had plenty to worry about, too, of course. But it’s a unique experience to know that every day the world is generating the emissions that will disrupt the basic workings of your only home, and that many of the things that adults treat as normal are actually making things ever more precarious. It makes you feel negative and resentful and angry, Margolin told me. It also makes you feel scared and uncertain in a time that, adults keep telling you, should be about dreams and goals.

A 2018 paper in the journal *Nature Climate Change* warned that the grief associated with “anticipated ecological losses” may be especially acute for children and youth. “It is likely to be particularly difficult to articulate a sense of grief felt over the loss of the future,” the authors wrote. But Gottlieb told me that he hears his peers articulate precisely that grief all the time. “That fear’s always in the back of our minds,” he said. “*I won’t have a future. It’s this constant anxiety, this thing at the back of your head.*”

In recent years, researchers have called for more study of how big planetary changes like climate change affect mental health. [A recent survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation and The Washington Post](#) found that when it comes to climate change, the emotions that most teenagers report feeling are anger, motivation and, above all, fear — but that they are actually less likely than adults to feel helpless. It also found that nearly a quarter of them had taken some kind of direct action related to the climate crisis: walking out from school, joining a protest, writing to the officials they were not yet old enough to elect.

Margolin is an only child, and she is close to her parents. Her father, Mark, is an engineer; her mother, Janeth, works at a food bank. Janeth grew up in Colombia, and she and Margolin speak Spanish to each other. Her parents didn’t pay much attention to climate news until their daughter’s ardor compelled them to. Now they’re proud, if slightly bewildered by it all. Mark does what he can to help out with Margolin’s intense scheduling and to keep her from overcommitting herself, and Janeth likes to deliver bowls of fruit when her daughter is stuck on a conference call. They both wish she would sleep more.

Since she was little, Margolin has suffered from depression, anxiety and obsessive compulsive disorder: “I’m literally like, What up, fam, I have depression.” But she throws herself headfirst into whatever she cares about. When she was in middle

school, an obsession with the Olympics — “There’s something for me almost religious” about them, she said, “the best of the best, the nations coming together” — led to a die-hard dedication to competitive rhythmic gymnastics. She wasn’t the best on the team, but she was known as the hardest worker. She worked out so much that she got a six-pack as a 12-year-old and then juvenile arthritis, a concussion and a stress fracture in her pelvis. But as an all-or-nothing person, she quit only later, when she realized she had fallen out of love with the sport.

It wasn’t long after that her worries about climate change began to occupy more and more of her thoughts. Margolin joined a local environmental advocacy group, started going to lobby days at the State Legislature and writing columns for the magazine *Teen Ink*. But no one seemed to be taking her seriously, and it all felt inadequate to the size of the crisis she was reading about. She posted on Instagram, calling for a youth march on Washington, and then started connecting with other young activists around the country to make it a reality. *Zero Hour*, so named to convey the urgency its founders felt, was off and running.



Margolin says that climate change is like Beyoncé: For members of her generation, its existence has always been a basic fact of life. Holly Andres for The New York Times

When I asked Margolin’s parents how they felt about the incredible amounts of time she now pours into her activism, Mark brought up the intensity she once felt for gymnastics: “She’s traded that for this,” he said, shrugging a little. (In Margolin’s bedroom, where she hasn’t gotten around to replacing the horse-themed bedspread she got when she was 4, her name tags from climate conferences and events hang off a row of old gymnastics trophies.) When I asked Margolin the same question, she answered that focusing on the work of organizing helps her deal with

emotions that would otherwise be overwhelming. In another world, she would rather be concentrating on her other interests, like writing or film or L.G.B.T.Q. rights, or just on being a teenager, the kind who plans dates instead of marches. But, she said, “If you’re like, ‘People are messaging me about this document that needs to be fixed,’ you’re not stressing about life on Earth.”

The bus tour eventually went online, of course. Like a lot of groups, Zero Hour struggled, as the novel coronavirus spread in the disorienting days of March, with knowing when to pull the plug. Margolin’s high school announced that it was planning to stay open, but two days later, it sent

everyone home, for what turned out to be the rest of Margolin's senior year. I called Margolin the day Washington's official stay-at-home order went into effect and heard loud rustlings on the other end of the line. "I'm stress-eating Popsicles," she said.

For Margolin, years immersed in the politics of climate change meant that there was a lot about the pandemic that felt familiar. Scientists' warnings went unheeded; government was slow to take the threat seriously; people protested that measures meant to protect them were infringing on their personal rights. A global danger initially dubbed a great equalizer turned out to be far more dangerous for people who already had less wealth and power. Then the stock market tanked, and the president and other public figures started calling for the economy to reopen long before epidemiologists believed it was safe: another sacrifice of life for money. Familiar, too, were the dread and uncertainty, the frustration of seeing disaster looming and not being able to stop it. It was, in other words, as if more of the world were learning what it felt like to be her.

By the end of the month, Margolin was as swamped as ever. Classes had moved online, and she had papers due, on top of nonstop conference calls and emails as Zero Hour figured out how to pivot its work online. "I'm still hustling," she said on the phone, "just inside and in baggier clothes." The group helped plan an online strike, a big livestream for Earth Day and a series of weekly webinars called Get to the Roots, a broad analysis of the climate crisis or, as Margolin put it, "the grand culmination of all our societal systems of oppression." Margolin worried about her mother, who is immunocompromised but was still going to the food bank — it was

busier than ever — while she and her father stayed holed up at home. She also lamented the loss of prom and the senior retreat and all the other events she'd been planning to finally take some time off to enjoy. "There's no guaranteed tomorrow, and I haven't lived," she said.

In April, I texted Margolin to see how things were going and got a despondent answer. "Bernie dropped out, my grandpa has the virus," she wrote. Her grandfather had gotten sick while living in an assisted-living facility nearby, and she wasn't allowed to visit him. After three weeks, he died, and the family held a funeral that felt sad and strange: just them, a rabbi and no guests, gathered around a grave. The world had shrunk to the walls of her house, and sometimes Margolin felt the need to withdraw from it altogether. She watched all five seasons of the series "She-Ra and the Princesses of Power" in one three-day period: "I was like, I hate the real world. I want to live on Etheria."

By the time we met in person again, Margolin's anger was palpable. The pandemic was exposing "the same pattern of [expletive]" as the climate crisis, she said: "Politicians would rather turn a blind eye and pretend it doesn't exist," at least until things got so bad they couldn't deny them any longer. She had recently gotten into film school, but so many things she once looked forward to had simply vanished that she couldn't bear to talk about it. What if her big chance at adulthood turned out to be more Zoom classes from her childhood bedroom? "I'm scared I'll let myself get excited about something," she said.

We were at a park in her neighborhood, on a peninsula that juts westward from Seattle, sitting far apart. It had taken me a long time to get there: The high bridge that connects the area to the rest of the city recently developed visible cracks in its concrete, and suddenly thousands of cars had to squeeze through a congested detour. The best estimate was that her section of the city would be cut off in this way for years. Margolin joked that given the way 2020 was going, an alien invasion might be next, but the truth was that she no longer found big cracks in the basic infrastructure of life to be surprising.

Lately, though, she had been thinking about the value of uncertainty: that big, sudden shifts could mean progress as well as disaster. Margolin had recently been to a Black Lives Matter march in her neighborhood, had seen public opinion race toward recognition of emergency at warp speed. Even when she felt her most tired and cynical, she could still imagine the world transforming — becoming new, becoming better.

The goal wasn't to go back to normal, after all: "The status quo was people being murdered by the police. The status quo was the climate crisis." It was still frightening to think about the future, but part of that fear had to do with understanding the perils of hope.

"I'm trying not to feel," she said. Instead, her plan was to focus on just doing the work that she could do, because she no longer knew what to predict.