

DISPATCH

# NEW YORK'S ORIGINAL TEEN-AGE CLIMATE STRIKER WELCOMES A GLOBAL MOVEMENT

By **Carolyn Kormann** September 20, 2019

On Friday morning, Alexandria Villaseñor, who, at fourteen years old, is one of the youngest organizers of the global climate strike, took the subway from Grand Central to Foley Square, in downtown Manhattan. This would be her forty-first week in a row of climate-striking. Inspired by Greta Thunberg, who had first skipped school to strike outside the Swedish Parliament, in August, 2018, Villaseñor had been demonstrating every Friday outside the United Nations since December 14th. Now she was on the subway with a group of other young activists, who had come to New York to join the strike and participate as delegates in the United Nations Youth Climate Summit, on Saturday. One of her collaborators on the train, Ciara Lonergan, who is seventeen, had interviewed her for a high-school English project on climate change. “The fact that she started this in the United States—it’s been so important,” Lonergan said. “The worldwide attention we have today is thanks to this movement.” Later that afternoon, Villaseñor would be introducing Thunberg, who was scheduled to give a speech at 5 p.m., in Battery Park. “I’m ready,” she told me.

The rally was scheduled to begin at noon. By 10 a.m., the square was hot in the sunshine, and already packed with thousands of cheering students and families. New York City schools had given all of their 1.1 million students an excused absence for the strike (but not the teachers, although I met several of them in the square). A class of sixth graders from Fort Greene was interviewing other young activists, including Avery Tsai, age nine, a staple on the climate-activism scene, who wore a floral crown and a cape covered in buttons. She carried an oversized cardboard cutout of a house in flames that read “Our House Is on Fire.” An eleven-year-old named Nazir Miller-Parker had a clipboard and was writing down a question that he planned to ask people at the march: “What can you do to stop climate change?” Workers all over the world, including a contingent from Amazon, were following the teen-agers’ lead and striking, too. Six thousand company Web sites had shut down and redirected visitors to the global-climate-strike Web site. In the next few hours, tens of

thousands more people flooded the square. Globally—there were strikes on every continent, and in a hundred and fifty-six countries, with huge turnouts in cities including Sydney, Berlin, and Munich—more than three million people were out in the streets.

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Villaseñor was wearing corduroys, hiking boots, a walkie-talkie on her belt, and, like all of the members of the New York strike's planning committee, a green climate-strike T-shirt with her name emblazoned on the back. She seemed somehow both giddy and calm. Another local teen-age organizer with a walkie-talkie, Shiv Soin, came over and gave her a hug. "All I'm doing is walking around, making sure everyone is alive," he said. "And to make sure our demands are met." They laughed. Villaseñor was rattling those demands off all morning: an end to fossil fuels, a complete and equitable transition to a clean-energy economy, and all fossil-fuel executives being held accountable. She feels angry a lot of the time, she said,

and “a kind of ecogrief” for everything that the world is losing. “But, when I go out and protest, it’s one of the ways that I feel like I have a say in what’s going to happen.”

Villaseñor moved to Manhattan with her mom in early 2018. In November, she returned to Davis, California, where she grew up, to visit family who still lived there. While on the trip, the Camp Fire broke out—one of the most destructive wildfires in California’s history—which scientists have attributed to climate change. Although she was nearly a hundred miles from the fire, “smoke was coming in the house,” she told me a few weeks ago, during one of her Friday strikes outside the United Nations. Villaseñor has asthma. “My chest started to get prickly, as it does with asthma,” she said. “I felt like needles were pinching my chest.” She kept a wet washcloth over her face, and relatives put wet towels under doors and windows, then sent her back to New York early on a red-eye. “She was really upset and angry when she got home,” her mother, Kristin Hogue, told me. “And sick for a few weeks. I had to take her to see a pulmonologist.”

Last December, as Villaseñor started researching climate change and wildfires, she saw Thunberg give a speech at the United Nations climate talks, in which she told the assembled delegates, “You are not mature enough to tell it like it is. Even that burden you leave to us children.” Villaseñor decided that she was going to strike, too, even if she and her mother weren’t exactly hopeful that it would amount to much. “We laughed and laughed,” Hogue said. “This is New York City—everybody is holding a sign on a street corner.” They made a sign that read, like Thunberg’s, “School Strike for Climate.” Arriving at the United Nations, she sat on the steps, and a guard told her that she had to move. “She got mad, and a guard kindly told her that she could sit on a nearby bench and hold her sign there,” Hogue said. That’s where she has sat for the past forty Fridays—in wind, in rain, and in a subzero sleeping bag during a polar vortex. She eventually founded her own climate-strike organization, Earth Uprising, which helped plan last March’s student-led global climate strike, and also Friday’s. She and Thunberg became friends online; the week after Thunberg arrived in New York, following her sailing trip across the Atlantic, she joined Villaseñor outside the U.N. for a climate strike.

Before Villaseñor became an activist, she spent a lot of time outside, acting in plays, and hanging out with her friends. “Normal kid stuff,” she said. She loved to swim in the rivers and streams near her home in California; her favorite animals were anything in the cat family—lions, tigers—although, if she could be any animal, she’d be a fish. After she started striking, she soon began spending hours each day talking to other youth climate activists on social media. “My view on life has changed,” she told me. “I see more of the structures that society has put in place. And that’s why my generation has been so impactful with the climate movement. We’re organizing outside of the structures that adults work in. Since getting involved, I just see how the system is broken, and it’s one of the things that needs to change.”





In Foley Square, the intensity was increasing, with huge waves of thousands of people cheering as Varshini Prakash, of the Sunrise Movement, led a rally before the march began: “Friday is about putting the entire political establishment on notice that our generation is energized and mobilized, and we’re watching you.” Vic Barrett, one of the plaintiffs in *Juliana v. U.S.*, a case in which twenty-one kids sued the federal government over climate change, in 2015, was also in the crowd. “I got involved with the case and started learning about climate change and environmental racism when Black Lives Matter was taking off,” he said. “And I saw that you have this vicious, obvious death and violence coming to black and brown people. But you also have this slow-burning death coming to us that these institutions think we’re not paying attention to.” He continued, “These last few weeks are really an indication of how much the youth movement has taken off. With all the last year’s scientific reports too, the I.P.C.C.”—the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change—“maybe some politicians and executives finally see we’re not making this up.”

The strike was timed to precede the U.N. Climate Action Summit, on Monday, which Secretary-General António Guterres has convened, calling on heads of state from all over the world to bring new, more ambitious plans for greenhouse-gas reductions in their countries in 2020—not only to fulfill the targets of the Paris Climate Agreement but to reduce emissions by forty-five per cent by 2030, and reach net-zero emissions by 2050. The strike also kicks off New York City’s eleventh Climate Week, with hundreds of events planned around the city. On Saturday, the Our Future Festival will take place on Governors Island; on Sunday, a day-long series of workshops on Building a Resilient Future will happen at the New School, followed by countless panel discussions, film viewings, staged interviews, and other direct actions throughout the week, including another strike led by Villaseñor. She took the stage at Battery Park on Friday before a crowd of two hundred and fifty thousand climate strikers. “Hi, everyone!” she hollered, a huge smile on her face. She told the story of how she started striking, then introduced Thunberg. “She is an icon of our time, and has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize,” Villaseñor said. “And now she’s here with us today. What I want to tell you about Greta Thunberg, though, is that she is the nicest, kindest, most humble person I ever met.” As Thunberg walked onstage, she gave Villaseñor a big hug.





Villaseñor told the story of how she started striking before a crowd of two hundred and people.



Greta Thunberg and Alexandria Villaseñor greeted each other on the stage at the event.

*A previous version of this post incorrectly stated that Villaseñor supports the Green New Deal.*



*Carolyn Kormann is a staff writer at The New Yorker. [Read more »](#)*

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# Video

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*Greta Thunberg Leads the World Climate Strike  
Three days before the United Nations Climate Action Summit, in New York City, millions around the world join the teen-age activist Greta Thunberg in a climate strike.*

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