



Youth Unstoppable
Slater Jewell-Kemker
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"I am passing the baton to you," said Jean-Michel Cousteau, as he handed 12-year-old Slater the delicate skeleton of a sea urchin.

Slater had been invited to visit the island where the famous marine biologist and documentary filmmaker had started a children's camp, where youth could learn about ocean sustainability.

It all started when, the year before, Slater had written an essay for the MY HERO project. The assignment was to write about someone who inspired her. For Slater, the choice was clear. She had reached out to Jean-Michel Cousteau because she admired his work as an environmentalist, and his friendly and open way of talking to people.

Not only did the famous oceanographic explorer answer her questions: he invited Slater to come visit the camp. "That was the first time I felt like someone who was very important took me seriously, and wanted to listen to what I had to say," she says. "He was a big influence for me."

When she met him in person, she recorded a video interview with him. At the time she was working as a youth journalist with the My Hero project, a website that shared inspiring stories on the internet. With a father who was a writer, and a mother who was a film producer, Slater had always been in love with telling stories. She made her first film when she was only six years old. "It was a musical, and I wrote all the lyrics and the music. And I made my parents act and sing it," she says. The same week she also shot another film, which she starred in herself, along with her dog. It was entitled *The Girl and the Talking Dog*.

Slater also loved watching movies. When she was fourteen years old, she sat in her parents' living room and watched *An Inconvenient Truth*, a documentary made by Davis Guggenheim, about global warming. It was eye-opening for her. "I remember about halfway into the film, I started crying and I didn't really stop for about four or five hours," she says. "It scared the hell out of me. It wasn't something that I understood or knew how to fix, and the people who *could* fix it were not doing anything."

Slater felt betrayed. All of her life she had been told that she had opportunities in her life, things that she could do and dreams she could realize if she wanted to. Suddenly, she started to question this. "None of it felt like it was real anymore, because there was this big thing called climate change rising up in the middle of my life, that made everything uncertain and unstable," she says. "And I wanted to *do* something. I wanted to be the person who had tried to do everything they could."

Slater was born in Los Angeles. Her house had a tiny backyard and it wasn't really safe for her to walk around the neighborhood. She constantly heard the blaring of sirens, and her school would have lockdowns semi-regularly, every time someone tried to rob the bank down the street. But when she was nine, she and her parents moved to a farm outside of Toronto.

"I think it really shaped the kind of person that I am, being able to spend days and days out in the woods, learning different bird calls," she says. "And just feeling like I was one small organism in this greater ecosystem."

Spending so much of her life in nature taught Slater an appreciation and awareness for the changing seasons and the constant circle of life and death all around her. She also learned more about climate change, and the more she learned, the more she began to question political leaders and authority figures. If the people who were in a position to do something about climate change had decided not to do anything, then who would? *If they aren't willing to act, they should step aside*, she thought.

In May 2008, when she was 15, Slater went to the Youth Environmental G8 Summit in Japan. For the first time, she got to meet young people from all over the world whose lives were being impacted by climate change. And they had *all* had enough.

Slater brought her camera to the summit. There she made lifelong friends, and it was also there that she started what would become a 12-year documentary film project. She decided she would tell the story of the environmental youth movement from within. The result was a documentary entitled *Youth Unstoppable*.

“It was literally just me with a backpack and a camera, but I was lucky to have the support of two producers, my mom and Daniel Bekerman, who trusted me enough to follow my intuition. My mom went with me to most of the countries, and organized on the ground to get the footage we needed.”

After the summit in Japan, Slater went on to travel to a number of other climate conferences, (COP's), in Copenhagen, Cancun, Paris, Poland, and Madrid, and always brought her camera.

In Mexico, she would get up at six in the morning, take a bus to the conference venue, and go through strict security controls. Then she would talk to young environmentalists and try to find good people to interview.

“You go in, and there are just hundreds and hundreds of people surrounding you, everyone going seemingly in opposite directions,” she says. “I was by myself, working 14 hours a day and then going back at the end of the day, downloading all of the SD cards onto my hard drive.” Then she would sleep for five hours and do the same thing again the next day.

At the conferences, she would simply walk up to people and ask them questions. “At the beginning, I would have to say that a lot of it was adrenaline fueled by terror,” she says, laughing. But soon she realized that she was actually in a position of power: she had the ability to share these people's stories, and they needed their stories to be heard.

But it was also exhausting. “It was too overwhelming,” she says. “Climate activism forces you to deal with worst-case scenarios, to ask difficult questions. It makes you question a lot of the things that make up your life.” She pauses, then adds, “And you do that alongside the frustration of seeing that year after year people not taking it seriously, people are not doing what they need to do, governments aren't taking it seriously.”

One thing that kept Slater going is the friendships she made along the way with other young climate activists. “It was a lot of fun,” she says. “You're going up against something, and you feel like what you're doing is right. You feel this sense of camaraderie, being part of this community that has a purpose.”

Besides, giving up the fight against climate change had never been an option for Slater. “I think we all share this feeling that this is the most important thing we've ever come across,” she says. “It's a mixture of perseverance and stubbornness, but it's also the feeling that I am doing something that might actually matter. That it might affect other people, and create positive change.”

In December 2015, after filming for eight years, Slater thought that she had found an ending for her movie. She was in Paris; and after having been disappointed so many times before, it seemed like finally there would be a global agreement to act on climate change.

“I was a bit wary of the excitement that was building about the Paris Climate Agreement, because I had seen that same thing happen before,” Slater says. “But it also felt like it really was an opportunity, that this could potentially finally happen.”

After a particularly long day of filming, Slater was on the way to a youth art space outside of the French capital, when suddenly her phone began to ring—the Paris Agreement had passed! Emails and texts started coming in like mad; some of her friends were celebrating the accord; others were disappointed that the deal wouldn't be legally binding.

“I was very confused about how to feel,” Slater says. “Because it felt like a victory; at the same time, it felt like it wasn't enough.”

But, overall, Slater decided to look on the bright side: the way she saw it, this deal was an opportunity to finally stop bickering and get to work on the problem. That's why she thought she finally had the ending for her film.

But it still didn't feel quite right, and she still had lingering doubts. “It was like, oh, is that it?” Slater says. “*Is* this the end of the film? Did we really win?”

Then, in 2016, when Donald Trump was elected President of the United States, it felt like a backlash to the successful environmental movement that had made the Paris Agreement possible. So Slater kept on filming – and within a couple of years, the environmental movement had come back in full force, led by a young Swedish activist who caught the world's imagination, and who helped bring together the energy of other dynamic and devoted youth leaders from around the world.

“To see Greta, Luisa, Jamie, and Xiuhtezcatl, and all the climate strikes, it's incredibly beautiful and inspiring and exciting, after trying for so long to have young people's voices be heard,” she says. “The school strike movement has become such a worldwide phenomenon! Seeing millions and millions of people out in the streets, it's incredible. It's amazing!”

In the end Slater worked on *YOUTH UNSTOPPABLE* for 12 years. She shot over 500 hours of footage, and spent 19 months editing. It will finally be released in 2020, after playing in over 100 film festivals worldwide, and garnering 13 awards to date.

This film paints a clear picture of the roots of the youth climate action movement. “I've had young people come up to me and say that, for the first time, they felt like they were actually spoken to as human beings and not just spoken down to,” she says. “And I've had older people come up to me and say that they had lost all hope. And that they feel re-inspired; that our generation actually cares and is doing something.”

Slater still has the little sea urchin that Jean-Michel Cousteau gave to her, all those years ago, after listening closely to what she had to say. “We're all in this together,” she says. “I think we need to truly listen to each other, and allow ourselves to be inspired; and to re-inspire each other with our stories. Because the only way we're going to fix all of these problems is together.”

To be truly radical is to make hope possible, rather than despair convincing.

Raymond Williams

Call to Action: VOTE. And if you're too young to vote, make sure the people around you are educated, and vote in representatives who care about the future of our planet. It will take all of us, but we can adapt if we work together. You can follow Slater's work at www.youthunstoppable.com, @slaterfilms and on YU socials <https://linktr.ee/YouthUnstoppable>

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