

# Pandemic forces youth climate activists to save the planet on Zoom

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It was just a year ago when Kevin Patel stood before a cheering climate change rally in New York and proclaimed that his generation would be the one to change the fate of the planet.

The 20-year-old South Los Angeles local was one of millions who had taken to the streets in a primarily youth-led effort to demand action against [climate change](#) during a week of global [climate](#) strikes.

"It was just quite, quite amazing," Patel recalled recently.

Today, however, as that watershed moment for a generation of young climate change activists recedes into history, Patel and others are facing a very different organizing landscape due to a global pandemic and national upheaval over police killings of Black men and women.

In the midst of stay-at-home orders brought on by the coronavirus pandemic, youth climate leaders across the country are juggling online school and Zoom fatigue, while still attempting to take action against the climate crisis and raise awareness about the inequities it amplifies. Many youth climate activists have also shifted focus toward showing up in solidarity for Black Lives Matter protests, while putting a pause on in-person organizing of their own.

It's been hard, but they haven't stopped working.

"We're still here and we're not backing down," said Patel, who is now living at home with his parents while Zooming into virtual classes at Loyola Marymount University.

The Global Climate Strike effort grew out of Fridays for Future, an organization started by Greta Thunberg, the 17-year-old Swedish climate activist.

This year, Fridays for Future held a global day of climate action on Sept. 25, with "online and offline" actions in 154 countries, following respective COVID-19 limitations.

Chandini Agarwal, 16, communications director of Youth Climate Strike L.A., said that since the pandemic began, their group has been striking online and embracing a different goal: "The online protest is more about getting the people who are involved enthusiastic and energized about the cause. But it doesn't actually disrupt the status quo of everyday life of civilians."

Agarwal thinks that level of disruption must be sustained in the Black Lives Matter movement. She's showing up every Wednesday she can to the weekly protests outside the Hall of Justice in Los Angeles.

Patel is also showing up to Black Lives Matter protests.

"I know if I don't go and I don't show my solidarity, then these injustices are just going to keep happening," he said. Patel protests with an extra eye toward safety, given that he has heart arrhythmias, making him more vulnerable to COVID-19. He developed this condition at age 12 and his doctors believe it may be linked to the high level of air pollution in his community in South L.A.

"When we're looking at the climate crisis, we're not only looking at warming of the planet, we're looking at how BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) communities are being most affected right now," Patel said. "We love to separate the issues of climate justice and social justice, but that's just wrong."

In this age of coronavirus restrictions, teen activists with the international organization Extinction Rebellion have embraced street art as a new way to show up, posting fliers and stickers across Los Angeles in an act of "socially distant civil disobedience," according to Kori Malia, 22, a national outreach coordinator for their L.A. chapter.

Online events have also been a success, organizers say. In April, for the

50th anniversary of Earth Day, a coalition of L.A.-based climate justice organizations came together under the name MVMT-LA and led a four-day action. Even online, it felt meaningful and connective. "We wanted to make sure this would not be just another rally or another virtual event, no, this was going to be how we pray," said Lex Saez, founder of the L.A. chapter of the International Indigenous Youth Council.

Many current youth climate activists got their start, or newfound momentum, at one of last fall's protests.

Malia said that being there made her realize that people could be powerful in a way that was "not just in the history textbooks, but something I was living in real time."

Ozzy Simpson, 19, organized a walkout at his high school in Pasadena as part of the effort. It was his first time organizing for climate action and, unexpectedly, about 500 people showed up. "Turning the corner and seeing that many people was really surprising and kind of humbling."

Now, Simpson is taking a gap year and working full time as a founding member of the Sunrise Movement's L.A. Youth hub. Most of their activism happens online, through Twitter storms and long Zoom planning meetings, but they do occasionally escalate to in-person, socially distant actions. Most recently, some members of Sunrise L.A. Youth protested outside CNN's Los Angeles office to "demand that they connect the climate crisis with the wildfires, with the hurricanes."

The August-September heatwave and the ongoing, historic wildfires are generating urgency as well.

Saez said the fires should be seen as "a cry for help. Mother Earth needs help."

"In moments like these, we really must rethink the way we live on the land and set our priorities straight," said Yulu Wek, 22, member of the International Indigenous Youth Council.

When the Bay Area woke up to orange skies last month, Lizbeth Ibarra, 15, said the first thing she did was reach out to fellow members of Youth vs. Apocalypse, an Oakland-based, youth-led climate justice organization.

They group-texted about how crazy it was, then quickly sprang to action. Within a few hours, they released a video. In it, lead members of the organization filmed themselves on selfie-view, in front of windows that are orange frame-to-frame: "Three years ago, when we decided our name would be Youth vs. Apocalypse, people literally laughed in our faces. As you can probably tell, the literal apocalypse is outside my window."

To do this work, youth climate activists stay busy—really busy. Patel squeezes in appearances on virtual panels and Instagram Lives between his online classes.

Sarah Goody, 16, has found new possibilities in multitasking: "I can kind of do my activism during class, which I know I'm probably not supposed to do." Goody is Zooming into sophomore year at her high school in Marin County and running the organizations she founded, Climate NOW and Broadway Speaks Up. "You've got the Zoom call in one tab and then on the other tab I'm responding to emails, putting together graphics, sending out different newsletters."

Joe Hobbes, 17, an organizer for Fridays for Future, is taking both high school and community college classes online, organizing for the movement, and working as a barista. "It's a tricky day schedule," he said.

"It's not easy," said Ibarra. "I mean, we're all teenagers. We have our own lives too. We have school, we have a lot to juggle. But, you know, we're still in a global climate crisis."

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