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# 'Real Education Happens Outside the Classroom'?: Pacific Climate Warrior Brianna Fruean and Anna Taylor of the UK school strikes movement talk about what inspires them and how to avoid activist burnout

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ABSTRACT In this powerful exploration of youth solidarity, a conversation takes place between two youth activists in the climate movement: the Pacific Climate Warrior Brianna Fruean, whose island of Samoa is already affected by cyclones and floods, and Anna Taylor, who kickstarted the United Kingdom's school strikes network. They compare notes on what inspires them, share their views on what should be taught in schools and swap tips on how to avoid activist burnout.

## Introduction

This is a piece that covers youth activism outside the classroom. The school strikes movement is a reaction by young people who feel they have been let down by those in power, who have failed to take the necessary action to protect future generations, their generation and those in vulnerable countries who are already affected by climate change. Their powerful challenge to the school system – the societal architecture that is supposed to equip them with the tools to be adults – is that pursuing normal education is a waste of their time unless radical action is taken to halt climate breakdown. It may inspire educators to stand alongside young people and give them the tools they need as active citizens to shape the world that awaits them. The conversation is also a moving call to arms that demonstrates the commitment and impact that young people's activism is having in the world right now.

## Conversation Moderated by Hazel Healy

**HH: Tell us about your journey into climate activism:**

**Brianna Fruean**: I started quite young – at 11 years old. That was when I first heard about this thing called climate change. And as a young girl here in Samoa, hearing the implications it had for my island in the Pacific scared me, it jump-started my passion to do something about it. I started my own environmental group in primary school. And it was literally just a whole bunch of 11-, 12- and 13-year-olds doing car-pooling registers and recycling bins and tree planting – just anything we could to send a message to the adults. Later we became 350 Samoa [part of the international environmental organization 350.org]. That was the beginning of my journey and I've stuck with it.

**Anna Taylor**: I grew up in London but I had a close connection with the environment – my parents would always take me out walking in the countryside. I've always been interested in activism; I went on a Greenpeace climate march many years ago, and I was disappointed because there wasn't another one for four years. Then in 2018, everything really got going with Extinction Rebellion. I went to their protest in October, around the time that the [United Nations science body] IPCC's report [on the impacts of global warming by 1.5 °C] came out, and the COP 24 climate summit happened in Poland. And Greta Thunberg started her 'Fridays for Future' school strikes.

When the Australian students walked out of school, they made it onto our news. It was really empowering and inspiring to see kids doing something about climate change. Then all these countries in Europe were getting involved – Germany, Belgium – but nothing in the UK. I didn't think I'd be able to set up a strike, being just one person. But I was talking to some people at a march and they said, 'Why don't you just start, do your best and see what happens?' And then within six weeks, it went from me and a friend sitting in a coffee shop to 15,000 students going on strike across the UK [on 15 February 2019]. So, yes – it's been a wild ride.

**HH: What was it like, Brianna, seeing this surge of activism among young people?**

**Brianna**: It was amazing for me. I feel like the young people of the Pacific are experiencing right now what young people around the world will experience tomorrow. In a way, we're the canaries in the coalmine, right? We're going in and we're telling the rest of the world: this is not good. Right now, we're having cyclones, floods and droughts, along with a lot of other vulnerable communities around the world. And it's only going to be that – and worse – for our future generations. And so it's great to see young people be passionate and not stand down to older people saying, 'You should be in school'. Real education sometimes happens outside of the classroom. I think the school climate strikes have really proven that.

**Anna**: That's a big thing that we're trying to push, too. I'm a Geography A level student – that's the last stage of school in England. We had a lesson today on climate change and they don't talk about it like it's a crisis at all. They were just saying: 'This is what America and China are doing to help reduce carbon emissions'. They said nothing about what they should be doing about the imminent catastrophe. And the textbooks say nothing about what's happening right now. Because actually this isn't just about our future, it's also about standing in solidarity with those who are experiencing it already. We're trying to educate our fellow students about that.

**HH: How do you find adults respond to young people in political spaces?**

**Brianna**: I think the biggest barrier, before we even begin to speak, is the stereotyping. We get: 'They don't know what they're saying', 'They're just there to get a day off school', or this idea that millennials, or subsequent generations, are only obsessed with their cell phones.

Even if you go back to the first UN climate talks at the Rio Summit in 1992, when young Canadian activist Severn Cullis-Suzuki spoke, there was hardly anyone there listening.

A lot of young people didn't know about Severn, unless they watched CNN or the BBC. I think it's different for Greta Thunberg. She's a youth voice that has come up in the generation of social media and technology where her message can be amplified. All my friends know Greta – and I'm from a small island in the South Pacific. Greta stabbed strong and she hasn't backed down. I think that she is going to do great things for this generation.

**HH: The Pacific Warriors have carried out some daring actions. Were you involved in the Newcastle canoe blockade in 2014, when Pacific activists and their Australian allies confronted gigantic coal ships?**

**Brianna**: I wasn't part of the blockade itself because I was underage, but I was very close to everyone who took part. It was someone in our Pacific Climate Warriors group who had the idea: to sail canoes out to Australia and blockade the canal where all the oil and coal ships come through, the busiest in the country. And that's exactly what they did. All these police came and they were trying to move them; at one point the police boats were hitting the canoes and flipping some over, and they just went back onto the land, fixed the canoes and went back out into the water.

**Anna**: I've done person blockades on roads before but never canoe blockades ...

**Brianna**: I think it was one of those civil disobedience events where the world saw that the Pacific is not going to stay quiet about climate change. Our slogan is, 'We're not drowning. We are fighting'.

For the atolls – the Marshall Islands, Kiribati and Tuvalu – it's just been a really hard time this past cyclone season. My island, Samoa, is volcanic, so we can move up the mountain. But the atolls don't have higher ground. This month, our Pacific co-ordinators' WhatsApp group has just been full of images of damage – the Marshall Islands' airport was completely flooded with ocean water. Extreme weather patterns are just getting worse. It's the biggest issue in the Pacific and we're having to look at climate migration.

**Anna**: I hadn't heard about any of that in the UK. The Pacific should definitely be in the media more. I'd love to share those images on our social media and help publicize it.

Without talking to each other before, we've found ourselves on the same journey. There must be so many of us and it's only a matter of coming together.

**HH: With the speed of climate-change-related impacts accelerating, how do you manage to stay optimistic?**

**Anna**: I'm torn between keeping up optimism and then facing the reality of the situation. I'm aware that if students feel disheartened and scared they might go into denial, try to pretend it's not happening (even more) and not do anything about it. So I try to keep that sense of empowerment and hope going. I spend time out in nature – swim in wild lakes, climb mountains, go out into the woods. That's what helps me stay calm.

**Brianna**: For the Pacific Islands, I really believe that it's our religion. A lot of islands are strong faith communities, and often when there's a cyclone people will flee to churches. Every village has a church – it is literally a place of refuge for us. Prayer and the spiritual aspect is therapeutic.

Solidarity also keeps you optimistic. And feeling that you have a team, that you're not alone. It's a huge energy boost when we see people striking all around the world, and we see someone like Greta, because it gives us the feeling that we're all in this together. It's not just one person yelling from outside the UN building or our government. And where there's mass numbers, there's power.

**HH: This one is actually a question from my nine-year-old son, who joined the climate strike in February. He asks, 'How do we stop our planet getting hotter?'**

**Anna**: In the UK, our first demand is definitely the most important: to declare a state of climate emergency, because that would then involve implementing loads of policies. We're discussing a Green New Deal in the UK, like the one they're

discussing in America. And we have key organizations and MPs [Members of Parliament] involved.

**Brianna**: My demand for governments around the world would be: divest from fossil fuels. Accept the science: fossil fuels cannot be the future of this planet. Second, we need to transition to 100-per-cent renewable energy, as soon as possible. And third, increase climate change awareness in the media and update school curricula. Young people in school now will be the ones to take over from this current political system and implement all the change that we're debating.

**HH: What gives you hope that the world can halt climate breakdown?**

**Brianna**: Maybe the fact that Anna, literally across the world from me, has the same passion. Without talking to each other before we've found ourselves on the same journey. There must be so many of us and it's only a matter of coming together. That makes me hopeful because I could see true change coming from someone like Anna.

**Anna**: Thank you, that means a lot. Seeing the movement grow gives me hope. Since February, we've got a whole new continent on board – I set up a Latin American co-ordination WhatsApp group after students contacted me from Chile, Mexico, Argentina and Brazil. Now they are all chatting together. New countries are joining all the time – Estonia and Iceland had their first strike not long ago – and that brings a sense of unity.

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