2019 Person of the Year - Greta Thunberg

By Charlotte Alter, Suyin Haynes and Justin Worland

“We can’t just continue living as if there was no tomorrow, because there is a tomorrow,” Greta says, tugging on the sleeve of her blue sweatshirt. “That is all we are saying.”

It’s a simple truth, delivered by a teenage girl in a fateful moment. Greta was on her way to the UN Climate Action summit, held in September 23rd, 2019, the last such summit before nations commit to new plans to meet the Paris Agreement. Unless they agree to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, the world’s temperature rise since the Industrial Revolution will hit the 1.5°C mark—something that scientists warn will expose 350 million additional people to drought, pushing roughly 120 million people into extreme poverty by 2030.

This not fearmongering; this is science. For decades, researchers and activists have struggled to get world leaders to take the climate threat seriously. The problem has been made worse by talk shows which invite scientists and skeptics, putting them on the same level and giving them both equal air time, as if both points of view were somehow valid despite the lacking science.

But this year, an unlikely teenager somehow got the world’s attention.

Thunberg began a global movement by skipping school: starting in August 2018, she spent her days camped out in front of the Swedish Parliament, holding a sign painted in black letters on a white background that read Skolstrejk för klimatet: “School Strike for Climate.”

In the 16 months since, she has addressed heads of state at the U.N., met with the Pope, sparred with the President of the United States and inspired 4 million people to join the global climate strike on September 20, 2019, in what was the largest climate demonstration in human history.

The politics of climate action are complex and tied with every country’s income and way of life, and Thunberg has no magic solution. But she has succeeded in creating an attitude shift, transforming the status quo into a worldwide movement calling for urgent change. She has offered a guideline for those willing to act, and hurled shame on those who are not. She has persuaded leaders, from mayors to Presidents, to commit to change; after she demonstrated in the UK with the group Extinction Rebellion, the U.K. passed a law requiring that the country eliminate its carbon footprint.

Greta focused the world’s attention on environmental injustices that young indigenous activists have been protesting for years. Because of her, hundreds of thousands of teenage “Gretas,” from Lebanon to Liberia, have skipped school to lead their peers in climate strikes around the world.

Thunberg has a form of autism called Asperger’s syndrome, which means she doesn’t operate on the same emotional register as many of the people she meets. She dislikes crowds; ignores small talk; and speaks in direct, uncomplicated sentences. These qualities have made her very effective. Where others speak the language of hope, Thunberg repeats the unassailable science: Oceans will rise. Cities will flood. Millions of people will suffer.

“I want you to panic,” she told the annual convention of CEOs and world leaders at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, in January. “I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. And then I want you to act.”

Thunberg is not the first to speak about the climate crisis, nor the most qualified to fix it. She is not a scientist or a politician, not a princess or a billionaire, not a pop star or even an adult. But despite being an ordinary teenage girl, she summoned the courage to speak truth to power and became the icon of a generation.

Thunberg’s moment comes just as urgent scientific reality collides with global political uncertainty. Each year that we dump more carbon into the atmosphere, the planet grows nearer to a point of no return, where life on earth as we know it will change unalterably.

The year of 2020 will be decisive: the E.U. is planning to tax imports from countries that don’t tackle climate change; the global energy sector is in trouble; China will draft its development plans for the next five years; and the U.S. presidential election will determine whether the leader of the free world continues to ignore the science of climate change.

“When you are a leader and every week you have young people demonstrating with such a message, you cannot remain neutral,” French President Emmanuel Macron told TIME. “They helped me change.”

Leaders respond to pressure, pressure is created by movements, movements are built by thousands of people changing their minds. And sometimes, the best way to change a mind is to see the world through the eyes of a child.

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***Reflection on Article***

Based on this article, what do you think are the qualities that make Greta Thunberg successful in spreading the message about climate change?

Do you think that the U.S. election has any bearing or influence here in Canada?

Why or why not?

What do you think needs to happen in order to revert climate change? How can YOU do something about it?