

Interview of Caroline Choi by Sarine Krovitz

Nov 19, 2021 via Zoom

Caroline Choi is an environmental activist and current student at Harvard College. She serves as a National Coordinator for Extinction Rebellion Youth US, a climate justice organization that uses non-violent civil disobedience to fight for the environment. Choi has also been active in local climate organizing and political volunteering.

SARINE KROVITZ: Thank you so much for joining me. Just to preface this interview, as I mentioned, this interview will be part of an archive that we're creating on youth activists in the 2010s. So this interview will only be used for future research and education purposes. You will have access to the final transcript, the final audio recording, you'll be able to make any revisions, any edits that you want. Basically, Youth Activism is understudied, and we are looking to fill that gap. We want documentation of these movements from the people who are leading them. So any specific stories you have to share about your journey as an activist, work that you're doing, that would be greatly appreciated. Nothing you can say is wrong. We're not looking for anything specific. We are just looking for you to share your experiences. Also, my time isn't limited. So I know you're busy, you've got classes, but if you have the time I have the time. Don't worry about going a little bit long or anything. Do you have any questions before we get started?

CAROLINE CHOI: No, not really.

KROVITZ: Awesome. So just to start off, it is not common for young people to be involved in activism, what inspired you to get involved in environmental activism?

CHOI: So in seventh grade, I watched a documentary called Racing Extinction. Very random. My dad was just like, "Hey, my company is doing this free screening, we should go." And I was like, "I don't really like documentaries. But I'll go with you, dad." And I went, and it was this really impactful documentary about how the wildlife are dying, and eventually humanity would die off too if we didn't prevent this disaster from happening.

And looking back now, that documentary definitely was a little problematic. So I don't recommend it, really, I think there's plenty of really great documentaries out there that do a better job. But yeah, as a seventh grader who hadn't really thought about anything like that before, it was definitely very impactful to me. And it just kind of stuck in the back of my mind when I went on to high school. And when I got into high school, I learned that the city that I lived in, Alameda, which is also an island, was going to be underwater because of the climate crisis. And I was like, wow, this connects back to what I learned in seventh grade, and what I've been slowly accumulating knowledge on up until now. And that's when I think my activism really kicked off.

KROVITZ: That's amazing. How did you start being an activist? What sort of steps did you take?

CHOI: That's such a good question because what defines an activist? I'd say anyone who is involved to some degree with local politics or federal politics could be considered an activist. For me, I definitely started out locally. I started going to our city's environmental meetings, and I got involved with the environmental committee, and then I started an environmental club on campus and slowly started getting more of our community involved with what was going on.

KROVITZ: What was the process like starting a club on campus? Did you face any pushback?

CHOI: It was hard finding an advisor for the club, mostly because I think back then, so that was like 2016, 2017, people didn't really talk about climate change in the scope that it's talked about now. And it was definitely sort of a niche thing. It was like, "Oh, well, we could worry about that later, if you're an environmentalist, you're kind of a tree hugger or you're a hippie."

KROVITZ: And what do you think changed in terms of talking about climate change from then to now?

CHOI: Oh, I will definitely credit Greta for making it national news and bringing up all these headlines, but it's so hard to say because, and this is something that a lot of climate activists have talked about, which is there was so much work being done by Indigenous activists and people of color who didn't get that recognition. But all of a sudden, this little girl, and no shade on Greta. I love her. She's amazing. But even she was saying, like, "how come I'm the face of the movement? I didn't start it." But for some reason, the news was like, "Oh my god, we love her. Let's make her the cover of Time Magazine and The Economist and all these different things." And then because the media suddenly picked up on it, suddenly everyone was talking about it.

KROVITZ: That's so interesting. What do you think, moving forward, including people of color in climate activism looks like?

CHOI: I think definitely centering them. I think there hasn't been enough of that. And this is another conversation that has been ongoing, especially since the large Black Lives Matter protests that happened very recently. For example, when we have protests and climate strikes, a lot of groups used to get police permits to be able to use the streets and have the strikes. But looking back now, it's like, what about all these people of color who felt uncomfortable with all that police presence. Those police weren't there to protect them, really, they were there to protect the white activists that were leading the marches and were at the forefront of the strikes. And so there's a bit of an ongoing conversation about that, too. And I definitely think we should be learning more from communities that are the most vulnerable, than, I don't know, white activists or white male activists.

KROVITZ: I know you've done work with Extinction Rebellion. Do you think that Extinction Rebellion has sort of integrated that philosophy into their work or not?

CHOI: Yeah, I definitely think so. And having been part of XR for so long, I've seen the group evolve and change its direction and their values and stuff like that.¹ I think originally, we definitely just started out, just like every other climate org, definitely a

¹ XR is the acronym for Extinction Rebellion.

very white climate org in the beginning as well. But now, I think it's definitely youth centered, people of color centered. And, yeah, it's amazing just to see how far we've come. And I think also because as people that make up the organization, we're also all growing and learning and actively trying to unlearn all these things that we were taught as kids. So yeah, I've definitely seen us start to move in a direction where I can feel very proud of the work that we're doing. And I think we're doing a great job of centering voices that have been marginalized.

KROVITZ: How did that change come about? Do you know how that process happened?

CHOI: Honestly, just a lot of really hard, uncomfortable conversations that would go on for hours, like we would all be on the Zoom meetings talking about, "Is our organization racist? And if so, what are we doing to make sure that not only are we diverse, but also that we're actively anti-racist?" We also had a lot of tough conversations about restorative justice and what that means for us.² Because it's like, "yes, we want to center survivors and victims, but also how do we continue to be abolitionists and also rehabilitate people that have done harm in our community."

KROVITZ: What does your role look like in Extinction Rebellion now and what did it look like? How has your role within the organization changed?

CHOI: So I started out as an outreach coordinator on the national team.

KROVITZ: How did you get that position?

CHOI: So I met Sophie Anderson and Jonathan Palash-Mizner at this random climate march in San Francisco, and they kept in touch. And they were like, "Oh, we're thinking of starting a US youth component of Extinction Rebellion, which has been around in the UK for about a few months or so. And they were like, do you want to come and help us

² Restorative Justice is a criminal justice practice in which there is communication between victims, offenders, and community members. More information can be found here: <http://restorativejustice.org/#sthash.H7Z4UqDO.dpbs>

with that?” And I was like, “Yeah, sure. There's nothing really else going on in my life right now. But I'd love to help out.” And then, yeah, we've come a long way.

KROVITZ: Wow. So you started as an outreach coordinator? What did that look like?

CHOI: I was helping set up all the new chapters, lots of emailing, lots of answering questions and really, I think, fleshing out like what our brand was. In the sense of what we do, what our goals are, what our demands are. And then I then moved to communications. So I was working with press and writing up op eds, press releases, editing other messaging documents. And when I started my first semester of sophomore year, so that's this year, I kind of took a break just to get readjusted with school being in person. But yeah, hopefully once winter break comes up, I'll get back into things.

KROVITZ: So you said that you met these people at a physical climate protest. Have you gone to a lot of these protests? What do you think the role of protests are in the movement?

CHOI: Yeah, I went to so many in high school. So many skipped school days, where my mom would call in “sick”. And then I would go to San Francisco, take the BART there, which is our public transportation.³ And yeah, I met so many people there. And to this day, those are people that I could definitely count on them to support me and offer aid if I needed it. And I think that's one of the most important reasons we have strikes and protests. Not only is it a place to publicly show that you're in support of something, but also there's a sense of community when you show up to those things. You show up and you meet people that you might have never met before, or had the chance to meet before and suddenly, they're your best friend. And you're building community actively in this space.

KROVITZ: Can you think of a specific activist or specific moment where someone else influenced the way that you were an activist or the way you viewed the movement?

³ BART is an acronym for Bay Area Rapid Transit.

CHOI: That's a really good question. So I met my friend, Dawn, at a San Francisco strike. And Dawn really changed how I view gender and sexuality. Not entirely focused on the climate crisis, but I learned a lot from Dawn about that. And then also, I met this woman named Danielle, who is very big on creating space for people who are disabled in the protest community. And eventually, six months later after we first met, we went to Arizona together to canvass during the national election and had a great time, we lived together. So yeah, there are just these random connections that you just kind of make and everyone's super cool. And they have their own little thing that they're very passionate about.

KROVITZ: Can you talk a little bit more about canvassing?

CHOI: Yeah sure. It was crazy, because I have grown up in the bay area, in California, and everyone kind of votes a certain way. You have the Democrats, and then you have the progressives, and then you have the AOC, Sanders type people.⁴ But it's very rare that you run into someone who's outspokenly conservative or Republican. But the spaces where we were canvassing in were very much swing provinces, swing districts, where you would knock on one door, and they'd be like, "Oh, yeah, I'm voting for Biden and Kelly", who was running locally, and you knock on the next door, and they're like, "Oh, my God, Trump has done so much good for our country. And you wouldn't know, but he's been helping Asian Americans more than you think." And I'm like, "Hm, I think I would know better than you, but all right, sir." I definitely do feel like I got better at talking to people who disagreed with me though, and that's come in handy more than you'd think. Like even on on my college campus, there are lots of like people who are conservative, which is funny considering that people are like, "Oh, Harvard is such a liberal school." It's really not. There are like lots of people who are like, "Oh, my, like granddad was a Republican governor and now I must carry on the family tradition." But you'll sit in the dining hall and just like learn that your friend is actually a staunch Republican. And then you're like, "Oh, how do I carry this conversation so that we're not

⁴ AOC is an acronym for Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Sanders refers to Bernie Sanders.

offending each other?” But like, “How can I convince them to see that what their values are actually do align with the left?” So yeah, very interesting.

KROVITZ: That's so interesting. What do you think the role of discourse is in activism in general, and then also in climate activism.

CHOI: There are some people who will say, some opponents to policies or your movement are lost causes, but I definitely do feel like you just have to plant the seed and keep nurturing it, and then eventually they'll be like, “Oh, you were right all along.” So I think discourse is very important. And I personally have seen that happen with my own parents, because my parents came from a pretty conservative country, and initially they were kind of conservative, like moderate. And slowly I would have these conversations with them about gay rights or sexism in movie theaters. Very random things. And now, they're very much voting for Sanders, they're progressive, and I don't feel uncomfortable talking about these things with them. Whereas in the past, it might have led to arguments and heated debate. But yeah, I definitely think there's value in having conversations that are sometimes uncomfortable, but even if you don't see a change right away, it's definitely something where people will continue thinking about it and learn from.

KROVITZ: Talking about your parents, I know you mentioned that your mom would call in sick for you to school so that you could protest. Were your parents really supportive of you in the activism work that you were doing?

CHOI: Yeah, they were very supportive. And I I definitely lucked out with having such supportive parents. But yeah, my mom would just call in sick for me. I'm pretty sure the school was really confused as to why I was getting sick every week. They maybe thought I had a weak immune system or something. Then she would drop me off at the BART, the subway system. And then she'd be like, “Bye, I'll pick you up in a couple hours.”

KROVITZ: Oh my gosh. Was that with the Friday's for Future movement? Or were those other protests?

CHOI: So we kind of had a Friday's for Future thing. It wasn't a very active chapter. But there was this girl named Sarah Goody who was always there on Fridays, and I would show up, and we'd sit in front of like City Hall or the Ferry Building. And that was kind of what I did for strikes. And then we also had bigger protests every now and then.

KROVITZ: Were those strikes just the two of you?

CHOI: Sometimes it was just the two of us and some random people who just decide to show up for that day. Sarah was consistently there every Friday, and I came when I could, but it was a smaller number of people. And then during the bigger, more organized strikes, a lot more people would show up.

KROVITZ: How did you go about organizing those larger strikes? What was your process like?

CHOI: Lots of Google Docs, strangely. It would kind of start with like, "Okay, what are our demands? And who are we targeting?" So if it was BlackRock, we'd be like, "Okay, let's have a list of chants or songs that we can sing about BlackRock and investments in fossil fuels and deforestation."⁵ And then we would do planning meetings where we would meet with other groups and other climate groups, maybe they're not particularly climate focused, but they might be a community that's affected by Black Rock. So community centers or community organizations, and we'd meet with them, be like, "Okay, let's figure out what our plan is for the actual logistics." And we would recruit speakers and figure out who was leading certain parts of the protest.

KROVITZ: What would you say is your biggest success that you had in high school doing this?

⁵ BlackRock is an investment management corporation.

CHOI: I talk about BlackRock because we had this really cool strike in front of Blackrock, and in the financial district of San Francisco. And a week later, the CEO released this open letter that was like, "Okay, fine, we'll divest." It was a big win for us. And I remember I was sitting in class, and I got a text from Sophie. She was like, "Did you see the news?" I was like, "what are you talking about?" And I got out of class, and I looked at my phone, I was like, "Oh, my God, we did it."

KROVITZ: Wow. And did they actually divest?

CHOI: They are in the process of divesting. But we have it on paper now. So they can't be like "we're not doing it."

KROVITZ: If you could guess, what do you think it was that pushed them to make that change?

CHOI: I definitely feel like public opinion. And also, I think they realized, like, "Hey, this is not good for any of us in the long run. And it's kind of a sinking ship. And we should jump out and stop just standing around doing nothing."

KROVITZ: Yeah. So it seems like you've done some work with corporations and the federal government and local governments. Where do you think efforts should be focused? Or do you think efforts should be focused on all three?

CHOI: I have come around thinking that efforts should be focused on getting these bigger corporations and banks to divest or to reallocate their budgets. Mostly because, yes, individual actions are important. And I definitely am an advocate for like, please recycle, please do all these things. But ultimately, we're putting the blame on individual people, when we should be putting on this blame on these huge corporations and banks that have just been having their own way for decades. They knew what was happening with climate change, even before regular people in the world knew what was happening. And I also think that's the government's fault too, in a way, for allowing these corporations to have run their businesses the way that they did for so long. And also,

because there's so many corrupt politicians that are taking money from these corporations when they really shouldn't be because they're being bribed to vote no on bills or misinform the public. Yeah, so that's where my thinking has shifted over the years.

KROVITZ: How do you think that shift came about? Was it just learning or was it something else?

CHOI: I think it was learning from others, and also just feeling hopeless for a little bit about whether my own actions were making any difference. Because I was like, "Yeah, I stopped eating red meat. I recycle, I compost. I do all these things. But for what? How is that going to do anything? When as much as I do, there's a company out there that's polluting tenfold and creating a huge carbon footprint." And I sat there and I thought about it for a couple of weeks. And I was like, "I think the messaging and the way we target people and places for strikes should shift to bigger corporations and banks."

KROVITZ: How do you think this shift in blame should happen? Is that with strikes like you're talking about?

CHOI: Yeah, I think strikes are important. Also, just public opinion. Also, getting politicians to really stick up for activists and communities and be like, "Hey, we need to start regulating this stuff more."

KROVITZ: So, shifting a little bit into your life as a student, how do you balance being an activist and being a student, doing internships, whatever, in high school and now?

CHOI: It's very hard. I think for me, I just had to reprioritize a lot of my life. In high school, I kind of put activism right next to getting into college slash doing okay at school. But I also was like, "I don't need to get 100% on every assignment to get a good grade. So I'm not going to put all my effort into doing my homework and stuff." And I still ended up at a good college so I feel like I did okay in high school. And yeah, I skipped classes and stuff to go to strikes. And honestly, that also was because my teachers were

pretty supportive and I could just be like, “Hey, I wasn't actually sick, I was at a strike. But I would love if you sent me the slides, and helped me catch up.” In college, I think it's different, because there isn't really a support system for you here. And you're away from home, you're away from the community that you grew up in, you kind of have to focus on building your own sense of community, your own support system. So it's a little harder in college. But I think it helps that there's so many different kinds of people here. And you definitely don't have trouble finding someone who knows of protests happening or who is passionate about an issue that you don't know much about and learn from them about it.

KROVITZ: Is there a lot of climate justice work happening at Harvard?

CHOI: Yeah, actually, so Fossil Fuel Divest Harvard just got Harvard to divest. So that was a big win.

KROVITZ: How did that happen?

CHOI: I think it's literally just being annoying to Harvard until they were like, “fine, we will divest.” But then this also ties into what I was saying about companies and banks realizing that it's not financially beneficial to keep having investments in fossil fuels. Especially because, if society falls apart, who's going to be paying for all that? Who's going to want a car? Yeah, so I think it was a mix of both student pressure and also just them finally realizing, “Hey, this isn't good for us, this isn't good for our students, it isn't good for our families.”

KROVITZ: Are you optimistic about the future of the movement? Do you think that fossil fuels are going to be falling out of favor in the near future?

CHOI: Yeah, I definitely think so. I think there's a trend of like, this is a good and bad thing, but a trend of people switching to electric for cars, or solar panels, renewable energies. I say it's a good and bad thing because it's bad when there's companies that are capitalizing on it. And Tesla, for example, is capitalizing a lot on these electric cars and

it's never accessible really for everyone. But I think it's good that there's a trend towards that.

KROVITZ: I looked into your work a little bit and I saw that you do some work at the intersection of computer science and activism. What does that look like?

CHOI: I can give you a couple examples of what I've done. The summer before senior year of high school, I took a NASA internship. And I basically worked with satellite data mapping out natural disasters in the South and then using real time data so that first responders could properly rescue people and figure out flood levels or stuff like that. And it kind of tied into what my work in the climate movement was because as the climate crisis gets worse, there's going to be more natural disasters and you're going to need these statements to help people try to save themselves and save each other.

KROVITZ: That's so cool. Do you know what you want to do in the future once you graduate?

CHOI: I have no clue. We just declared our majors. I am doing a double thing in computer science and political science, but my hope was by the time I'd graduated from college, I wouldn't have to keep doing activism and the problem would have solved itself. But I am not optimistic about that. I think there's still going to be a need for some kind of civic tech jobs and whatnot, so possibly that.

KROVITZ: Do you think technology will play a role in solving the climate crisis?

CHOI: Yes, I think so. But I don't think it's as big of a role as people think. I think Silicon Valley has done a good job of making it sound like they're necessary to fix the world's problems, but in reality, there are already things that we can do that would completely reduce our climate emissions, like defunding certain banks, or certain pipelines and stuff. And those are very clear, actual items that we literally could get done by the next day. But instead, they are like, "Oh, maybe we could build some kind of huge solar panel

that would offset the emissions of this one pipeline in Canada.” And it's like, just get rid of the pipeline.

KROVITZ: Exactly. Would you consider there to be a need for a climate emergency right now? Where do you think we're at in terms of climate emergency status?

CHOI: I would definitely say it's an emergency. It's not something where you're going to see the change overnight, but in the coming decades, in our lifetime, it's going to be something that we're all going to see affect us. And I think already people are seeing it start to change the weather. People will be like, “Oh, my God, why is it not snowing in Boston right now?” Probably the climate crisis. Like the California wildfires, which I was present for because I did my first year online. And while everyone was in various parts of America, on zoom, I remember people would be like, “Oh, my God, do you have red LED lights in your room?” I'm like, “No, that's just the sky outside.” So stuff like that.

KROVITZ: I know you mentioned how your community where you grew up in is going to be underwater eventually. Have you started to feel those effects?

CHOI: Yeah, I think the king tides and whatever the high tides are they're definitely getting higher and higher every year. And there's tsunami warning signs up. And people just kind of forget that they're there because they've been around for forever, but no, this is a real thing that could happen.

KROVITZ: What do you think are next steps for the climate movement? Do you think the movement should continue striking, protests, doing the things they're doing now? Or do you think that there's another step that needs to be taken?

CHOI: I think the momentum that we built up is really good and I think we should definitely continue the momentum. There isn't a need to stop yet. And I think with COVID, a lot of people kind of lost that momentum. Because people weren't in person, that sense of community wasn't really there. But hopefully now with things kind of

clearing up, we can start to rebuild that momentum and rebuild that community and just keep doing what we have been doing in the past.

KROVITZ: How did COVID impact climate activism, in your experience?

CHOI: In my experience, everyone kind of reached a point where they were like, “What are we doing?” And we had a lot of calls where people were like, “Okay, what are the next steps for us?” And we didn't really know, because everything felt so uncertain. But in a way, it was like, “Oh, this is an example of what might be happening a lot more in the future. And how we respond to this is important, because it shows us if our community ties really are there, and I think the community definitely was there. It wasn't as strong as when we were in person, but we had mutual aid projects that sprung up, and people were helping each other in their local communities. And I think that was really beautiful. Also I have to hop off in maybe two minutes.

KROVITZ: That is a-ok. I appreciate the time that you've had already. So just to end it, I guess, what advice would you give to people still wanting to get involved in this movement?

CHOI: I would say find out what you can do locally, and then branch out nationally. I think it's always important to have that base level of support locally and have your place in the local community and then branch out and figure out how you tie in nationally.

KROVITZ: That is so wise. Thank you so so much. I really appreciate this. You're doing incredible work. I will be in touch, probably within the next week, with a copy of the transcript so that you can let me know anything that you want to change, take out whatever, and we should be good. Also, I looked over the consent form you sent and it does need to have a physical signature. Within the week, if you could print that out and get a signature back that would be great.

CHOI: Okay, sounds good.

KROVITZ: Thank you so much!

Index

Abolitionists.....	4
Alameda.....	1
Anderson, Sophie.....	4, 8
Anti-Racist.....	4
Arizona.....	6
Asian Americans.....	6
Banks.....	9, 10, 11, 12
Bay Area.....	6
BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit).....	5, 7
Biden, Joe.....	6
Black Lives Matter.....	3
BlackRock.....	8, 9
California Wildfires.....	13
Canvass.....	6
Carbon Footprint.....	10
City Hall.....	8
Climate.....	1, 3, 8, 11, 12, 13
Change.....	2, 9
Crisis.....	2, 6, 12, 13
Emergency.....	13
Conservative.....	6, 7
Community.....	5, 8, 10, 13, 14
Corporations.....	9, 10
Corrupt Politicians.....	10
COVID.....	13, 14
Democrat.....	6
Disabled.....	6
Divest.....	9, 11
Extinction Rebellion (XR).....	3, 4, 5
Outreach Coordinator.....	4, 5
Ferry Building.....	8
Fossil Fuel Divest Harvard.....	11
Friday's for Future.....	7, 8
Gender and Sexuality.....	5
Goody, Sarah.....	8
Harvard.....	6, 11
Indigenous Activists.....	3
Kelly, Mark.....	6
Marches.....	3, 4, 5, 8

NASA.....	12
Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria.....	6
Palash-Mizner, Jonathan.....	4
People of Color.....	3, 4
Police.....	3
Progressive.....	6, 7
Protests.....	3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, 13
Racing Extinction.....	1
Republican.....	6
Restorative Justice.....	4
San Francisco.....	4, 5, 6, 9
Sanders, Bernie.....	6, 7
Strikes.....	3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11
Swing Districts.....	6
Thunberg, Greta.....	3
Trump, Donald.....	6
Zoom.....	4, 13