

Jillian Jacobs 00:00

Okay, awesome. Well, thank you so much for meeting with me, I'm really excited to talk. And so I'm just going to go over the whole youth archive again. So basically, what we're doing is the Documentary Studies Department is trying to collect interviews from different youth activists for us to put into the Duke archives so that people in the future can look back on these different movements and these different people, and all of that sort of thing. And so, after we're done with the interview, I will send you a copy of the transcript. And so you can go through and you can have me take out anything, you can have me add in things that you want. If you would like you can be anonymous, we could wait for like five years to release the interview. So like you have complete control over what gets put into the archive. I think that's pretty much it. Do you have any questions before we get started?

Kayla Hayempour 00:57

No, not at all. I'm excited.

Jacobs 00:58

Okay, awesome. Okay, so just a general question. What got you involved in activism?

Hayempour 01:05

Yeah. Okay. So my activist story is very personal, it was about a lot of my personal experiences, specifically, because I work in the menstrual equity field of activism. So I got my period at a super young age. And I really struggled with debilitating pain that caused me to miss out on school, activities, which was really difficult socially, mentally, physically. And it wasn't actually until I was watching the Oscars in 2019, that my views towards periods, and the way that I saw my own period, completely flipped¹. There was a documentary called Period End of Sentence that won best short documentary, and the founders and the producers got up there and they were like, a period under sentence, not a girl's education, which totally resonated with me because of my own experiences with menstruation. And from that point on, I was just so empowered to make change. And that's actually how I even discovered that there was like a menstrual equity movement in the first place, or that there was the issue of period poverty happening in other countries. And so that's really what kind of sparked my interest and my passion for it. And from then I just completely uncovered, like an entire feminist world that works in this area, which was really cool. And now I'm actually working with the producers of that documentary. I'm an ambassador for the organization, which is like, so crazy to me. So it's really come full circle.

Jacobs 02:35

That is so incredible, congrats on that.

¹ The Oscars are an award show for movies and films.

Hayempour 02:38

Thank you.

Jacobs 02:39

So what were the steps from when you kind of had this mentality shift, you know, when you were watching the Oscars, to where you are now? Like, what was the first thing that you did once you were like, this is something that I'm really interested in, and I want to pursue this.

Hayempour 02:58

Totally. So I did a lot of research, actually, my mom helps me out with this too, because I wasn't even downstairs watching the Oscars with them, she paused it and she was like, "Kayla come down, like you have to see this." So it was really just a lot of research to see what opportunities were out there. And through researching the film itself, we discovered that the girls who had produced the documentary were actually delegates to a convention called the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women. And that's like an annual global convention that happens through the United Nations to talk about women's rights in the state of women's rights currently, and progress that needs to be made. And then we discovered through the chain that the way that they were able to be delegates to that was through another organization called Girls Learn International, which is another human rights feminist organization. And so I started a chapter of Girls Learn International at my high school. So I was running that club. And from there, it's just like, as opportunities came, like I just applied for everything because they were all connected. So through Girls Learn International, that's where you know, through their newsletter, that's where I saw that women deliver was opening application. So I applied for Women Deliver. I also, you know, started following the pad projects on Instagram. And so I saw when they started - the Pad Project is the organization that created the documentary, and I saw that they were creating an ambassador program. So I applied for the ambassador program. And then, you know, I ended up working my way up like within the organizations, I was a part of themselves. So I interned for Girls Learn International, I was a student advisory board leader for Girls Learn International. And once I kind of had the experience working then I started branching out more personally. So I started my own organization called Petticoats Rule. So with that, I actually also ended up being a delegate to the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women and connected with an organization called PHI in Nigeria, it's a women's health organization. And so I led a joint education campaign with them. We had a Zoom webinar to talk about menstrual equity². We also did some fundraising. I applied for a grant program in Los Angeles. So I put together menstrual kits through that, reusable menstrual kits, and ship that to Nigeria, and to homeless shelters in Los Angeles. So it was really just like, once you discover - once I discovered one organization through that I just ended up kind of catapulting through every other organization that works like in the feminist sphere, because I think there was like a really large network that maybe not a lot of people are familiar with. So yeah, also through Girls Learn International, I

² Zoom is an online video chat platform that became popular during the Covid-19 pandemic.

discovered Free the Period, which primarily works on college and school campuses, lobbying for bills and things to have access to free menstrual products. And so now I'm working with them, because I'm a university student now. So it was really just finding one organization that I resonated with, and then literally just applying for every other opportunity that came up through there to end up like, kind of crashing my way into everything else, which now I'm glad that I was able to do.

Jacobs 06:14

No, that's incredible. It sounds like you've been very busy and very productive.

Hayempour 06:19

Yes, no, definitely all of it happened really, really quickly. Like it, you know, this was only 2019. So in a span of like, two years, basically, I started from absolutely zero experience in the activist field. And that's what I think is so cool about activism is it's like, there's so many different things that you can be a part of within an activist space. And so once I found like, you know, I always knew I was a feminist, like, I would post things on Instagram, just like everyone else, but I didn't really have like, a direction³. And so once I ended up finding something that actually connected with my personal experiences, it made it really fun to go and see what else is out there. And how I can end up turning that into more of like a long term project, or maybe something I work on career wise, in the future, things like that.

Jacobs 07:08

Was it difficult to balance all of the stuff that you were doing as an activist while also being in high school and applying to colleges and all of that?

Hayempour 07:16

Yeah, I definitely would say that it was, I think something that also was not maybe recognized as much as the concept of activist burnout. And the idea that when you're working like so hard, or fighting for so many things, oftentimes it can become really overwhelming, not just in the workload itself, but also just the realization that, wow, there are actually a lot of problems within the world. And that's something that we have to fix. And so that like, mentally became a little bit overwhelming, like academics aside, and so something that I tried to remind myself for that is you don't have to change the whole world, you just have to change your corner of it, which made things seem like a little bit more manageable from an activist perspective. And then school wise, like, time management was just the biggest thing, like, even now I have an agenda that's filled with a million things like I run out of room sometimes and have to put like sticky notes on top to get through all the things I have to do. But that's the nice part is when it's something that you like, enjoy doing, it doesn't feel as much of a chore to actually like, sit down and do the work. But definitely a lot of time management and even now, like first quarter of college I worked a lot

³ Instagram is a social media platform in which users post photos with short captions.

through my, on my own organization through the summer. And that was where I had like the majority of my campaigns and distributing menstrual kits and all that stuff. And so first quarter, I was like, I'm gonna chill on that, like, I'm gonna let that say like, I completed kind of what I wanted to do as a short term goal. And now I'm going to just focus on academics and like, you know, other clubs happening in college, before picking it back up again.

Jacobs 08:54

That's awesome. So would you be able to tell me a little bit more about your organization and some of the goals that you have for the future of it?

Hayempour 09:01

Yeah, absolutely. So my organization is called Petticoats Rule. So petticoat rule was what it was, like a term coined when women were first fighting for suffrage in the United States. And the idea was that like, men didn't want them having political power, because they were afraid of petticoat rule, the idea that they would end up taking over the government. And so my - I literally found the term in a thesaurus, which was kind of funny. But my idea of petticoat rule was empowering women through menstrual products and taking back your power and your seats at the table through that avenue. And so that's how Petticoats Rule was born. I created the - so it honestly started out as something completely different. The reason that I'd even thought of launching my own project instead of working only through other organizations was because the Jewish Federation of Los Angeles had sent, again an email to my mom that she was like, okay, like you should do this so thankful for her for that one. But they have like a series of teen innovation grants where you basically apply with a project idea. And then they end up funding it for you, you get like a certain amount of money. And then that's how you work towards the project. And so my initial project was just to have a local screening of Period End of Sentence like in my - I went to high school in the Palisades in Los Angeles. And so I was going to have a community event there, just because the demographic of Palisades is very much like an older, wealthier, white neighborhood. And so I knew that period poverty and menstrual equity were not things that they would necessarily be exposed to. So to try and break down that menstrual stigma, that's what I wanted to do is to have the screening, but then Covid hit and I had to find another way to use the grant funding, because you can no longer have in person events⁴. And so I ended up through another organization called Days for Girls after like a ton of research, getting 150 reusable menstrual kits. So they're cloth pads, they come with soap, underwear, anything that you would kind of need to sustain a period for two to three years. And that's when I was like, Okay, well, maybe I could actually turn this into a thing. So my organization Petticoats Rule started with the initial idea of just distributing these reusable menstrual kits. But when it really

⁴ This is a reference to the Covid-19 pandemic which began in 2019 ("CDC Museum Covid-19 Timeline." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 4 Aug. 2021, <https://www.cdc.gov/museum/timeline/covid19.html#:~:text=December%2012%2C%202019%20A,of%20breath%20and%20fever.>)

took off is when I decided to partner with the organization of PHI in Nigeria, they were having a Zoom event through the the UN Commission on the Status of Women on the state of poverty in Africa through Covid because Covid has exacerbated a lot of the issues that were already present. And they were just like, if anybody wants to partner we're gonna put our email in the chat. And so I sent them an email, and I was like, I would love to partner, you know, I have these medical kits, I'm trying to figure out where to distribute them, I was just gonna put them in homeless shelters in Los Angeles. But you know, maybe I can work with you. And so we ended up having an online, as I mentioned, like an online Zoom webinar, where we basically, I went through my own presentation of what period poverty is primarily what it looks like in the US with more economic factors with the pink tax, and general stigma. And then from PHI, they did their presentation on specifically how like the cultural aspects. And in small villages in Africa, specifically in Nigeria, and contributing to the issue of period poverty and what they're working to solve, how they're working to solve it. So we fundraised about \$2,000 over the summer, and that went towards sewing machines, because part of the idea of breaking down period poverty is to address it at the root issue. And one of that is just that women don't have economic independence in those countries. And so they often don't have the money to access products, even when they are available. So the idea with the sewing machines is like, not only are you creating the products that are necessary, so girls can still go to school, so girls can still work. So that you're almost creating little micro economies so that women can also gain independence and other ways beyond just education. So we fundraise money for that. And then I ended up sending them 100 of the menstrual kits that they actually just distributed last month on the International Day of the Girl, so they're going to be sending me photos of that soon, which will be really cool. And I don't know, I know you mentioned in your email that in the contract that we can provide additional resources, if that's something that you think would be interesting. Like, I could totally get permission for her to -

Jacobs 13:57

Oh, absolutely. I would love that.

Hayempour 13:58

- send those over. Yeah, absolutely. And then the other aspect of it is I still decided to send 50 kids to a homeless shelter in Los Angeles called Casa Azul. And that's because - so freshman year, I think it was freshman year, I was on our Mayor's Youth Council, and the primary thing that they had us working on was just sharing presentations about this new housing system, temporary housing system that our mayor had set up called a Bridge Home. But the issue was that there weren't there still weren't resources available for people who - for menstruators, for people who got periods, you know, there were like job resources. There were places where you could even bring your pets but there was no system in place to make sure that menstrual products were free and available, which is an essential part of living with dignity. And so absolutely, it's our human right. And so that's why I still decided to send some menstrual products to one of the

housing facilities within that program. So that was something that, you know, personally close to Los Angeles I could work on. So that was definitely like completion of short term goals. And in terms of long term, I really, to be honest, I don't know, I feel like there's so many things that are like going on, but it's just trying to navigate like, okay, which one am I going to pick. I would definitely love to expand a little bit to talk about other issues that are still within the realm of sexual and reproductive health and rights, but aren't necessarily specifically tied to menstrual equity. So for example, talking about gender based violence, or child marriage, or female genital mutilation, like all things that are within the same sphere, as menstrual equity and are connected to it, but aren't necessarily mental equity themselves, I think it would be really cool to talk about just to expand like my own worldview a little bit in fighting for issues⁵. And then also, just more, I feel like I've done a lot of education, and I've done a lot of action in the sense of providing products, but I would really love to work on more of a public policy focus. So lobbying for actual, like legislative bills to be passed. Because ultimately if the structure itself doesn't change to accommodate for like the change that we're pushing for, then, like, there's never actually going to be a true difference in the long run. And so I would really love to work both in the United States and abroad, like policy development, which I definitely see is a possible career in the future, too. And that's why I'm excited. Like, as a college student, it looks like I'm actually going to be the one through this other organization to free the period like working on a UC campaign⁶. We already lobbied for a bill to be passed, and it was passed AB 367, the Menstrual Equity for All Act, which was really cool. But the UCs are only suggested to implement it. And so just making sure that those things are actually implemented is definitely something that I see myself working on through my organization in the long term.

Jacobs 14:01

Oh, that's incredible.

Hayempour 15:56

Also, I have to say kudos to you for transcribing this. I know I, if you have any clarifying questions, please let me know. Because I think when I try to explain my story to people, it can be a little bit confusing, just because everything kind of happened at the same time. And like, the way that I found other things was just through branches of other things. And so like, it's hard for me to go in, like a chronological order. So I know, it's like, it's a big, it's a big thing. And I know I'm talking a lot. So honestly, kudos to you.

Jacobs 17:34

⁵ Female genital mutilation (FGM) refers to the non-medical removal of a female's external genitalia ("Female Genital Mutilation." *World Health Organization*, World Health Organization, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/female-genital-mutilation>.)

⁶ A UC campaign is a campaign to raise awareness of certain issues within the University of California school system.

You are all good. And absolutely, if I have any clarifying questions or anything, I will email you and I'm like, okay, sorry. But could you clarify what you meant here?

Hayempour 17:45

Yeah, absolutely.

Jacobs 17:46

But no, I love just being able to listen to your story, because it's been so interesting. And it's incredible, all the different things that you've gotten done. And so kind of following that, you know, you've done so many incredible, awesome things. What would you say you're proudest of?

Hayempour 18:02

Oh, that is a good question. So I would say that one of my proud accomplishments is definitely being a delegate to the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women. I think that was one of the first times that I really felt and understood the international scope of issues. And while a lot of it was like, a little bit disheartening to see just like, how much we fought for and how, not that how little has been accomplished, but in the way that there's still so much to fight for after we've already kind of put in all this work. But it definitely served as even more of a motivator. And definitely, you know, piqued my interest in all these other feminist ideas, but also just the fact that, like, I went to the United Nations, and I spoke on panels at a United Nations Conference. Like, I think that's something that, like how many people can say they've done in a lifetime. So that was definitely really, definitely something that I'm really proud of that I was able to reach like a global stage and a point where I could share my story to other people all across the globe, who had never met me before, who were of all ages of all backgrounds. That was really, really important to me. And also, just like, in general, I think I'm just proud of like, where I've gotten, like, if you'd asked me two years ago, if I ever thought that this was what I was going to be doing, like I probably would have said no, even though I think, like I naturally have a very activist spirit, like I don't think I ever would have thought that like this would actually be my world. And so I think I'm just proud of the way that I've started from absolutely zero experience and then worked my way up to the point where I'm like, involved in so many different things. So I feel like just that, like, growth personally is something that I'm very proud of.

Jacobs 20:00

Yeah, no, that's incredible. Is there a specific memory from your experience at the United Nations that is particularly meaningful to you? Was there a specific experience that really stood out?

Hayempour 20:11

Yes, actually, there definitely was. So part of my, one of the roles that I had in the conference was I was leading a global discussion circle, with girls aged, I believe, thirteen to or even as young as nine, I think the were aged, the youngest girl that I had in my Zoom Room, I believe was nine and the oldest was about 17. And basically, what we were doing is just trying to, because they come from countries all over the globe, trying to understand, you know, what periods looked like in their country, and how to break down stigma and honestly just start a social conversation. So my room specifically was sexual reproductive health and rights and bodily autonomy. But our primary focus ended up being periods just because that was the one thing that everyone kind of had in common. And there was one girl who's from India, I cannot, off the top of my head, remember where specifically, but she was talking about how when she's on her period, she's not allowed to go into the kitchen, because periods are seen as impure. And so she wasn't allowed to, like, go into the kitchen and handle food and touch food. And so, you know, I'd ask them what is your way of like, breaking down mental stigma, and fighting period poverty. And she was just like, I just walked into the kitchen when I was on my period, and I got a snack because I was hungry. And like, she - that was something that she was so proud of like, you could hear it in her voice that it was such a big step for her to just be like, you know, I'm hungry, I want to get a snack and I'm on my period, but I'm going to go do anyways, even though like, you know, because of stigmas and taboos and whether it be religious or cultural laws, that's not something I'm supposed to do. And it really, it really just hit me because I was like, wow, I am so privileged in the sense that I can go to the kitchen when I'm hungry and get a snack, regardless of whether I'm on my period or not. And hearing just how different our experiences are was very mind blowing, but also, it was like a very, like, it felt really good because it was like, but here we are, like, we're still having a conversation and we can still connect over our shared experiences. So that was just so like moving to hear like, Oh, I just went into the kitchen, I got a snack. And like that was her revolution. That was that was just so cool. So cool to hear.

Jacobs 22:36

Oh, man. Yeah, no, it sounds like it was. And it's also incredible that you had that opportunity to kind of get a glimpse into different cultures and how people across the globe deal with periods, and then the different types of stigma within it. So awesome. So in a kind of a different direction. If someone came up to you and was like, I really want to get into activism, I don't know where to start, everything seems so huge. What would you tell them?

Hayempour 23:06

Yeah, oh, my gosh, I've totally had people come up and ask me that. And they're like, how can I get involved? How can I get involved? And like, the number one thing that I say is just research, if you already know what you're passionate about, that makes it a little bit easier, like I've had people come up to me and they're like, you know, I'm really interested in the environment, like, Where can I go, I was like, if you just search up like environmental organizations, environmental nonprofits, and put in your city, the amount of organizations that come up is kind of crazy. And

that can maybe make it a little bit more overwhelming, in a sense, but I think it's really just like, you have to have the time and patience to sit through and like find one that you think actually like resonates with your with your goals. So Girls Learn International, for example, like the way that I was like, Okay, I could get behind this because in their mission statement, one of their focuses was girls' education, which was important to me, because of my experiences with missing school, and difficulty catching up because of my period. And also the way that they were an international organization in the sense that, yeah, they could take delegates to the United Nations, they had chapters, over 250 chapters all across the globe. So that was like something that resonated with me, and I was like, Okay, this is an organization that I'm going to stick with. But I think like, that's the thing is, you just have to kind of keep looking, scroll through Google⁷. Keep clicking on organizations until you find one that you resonate with. And then from there, just stick with it, move up. Like if you're starting out as just a student volunteer, okay, then maybe you maybe they have a board like a team or student board or Teen Council board that you can sit on. And then maybe once you're in college, they have fellowships for college students. Like just finding one that you that resonates with you and stick with it. And I think that can also make it a little bit more manageable is instead of like trying to join, every organization that's out there is like, once you find the one, just stick with it and see where it goes. And if you decide that wait actually this isn't my style, then go back to the other options that were on your list. I also fully just like, recommend, because a lot of people come up to me if they're interested, like specifically in the space that I'm working in, and they're like, Oh, I didn't know this was a thing. This is really cool. How can I get involved, and 100% I direct them to all the organizations that I've been part of I was like, there's this there's that like, there's Girls Learn International, there's, you know, the Pad Project, there's Free the Period, like, I was like, just go on their Instagram, like go on their Instagram, that's totally how you find them. Especially because I feel like those organizations in the feminist space are often posting about other opportunities happening in the activist world. And so if you can just follow one of them on Instagram, like if you just follow Girls Learn International on Instagram, the amount of - and I know I keep going back to them, but it's just because that was personally like where I started that ended up giving me so many other opportunities is like, if you just follow someone on Instagram, I guarantee you, they will be posting it absolutely everywhere. Because like people are always looking for volunteers, people are always looking for people to help their cause. And so that's something that I think can maybe be a little bit more reassuring is it's not, you know, maybe as you move into higher positions and try applying for more competitive positions that can maybe be a little bit more difficult. But I think getting into the activist space is not as cutthroat as maybe people think it is like just getting in like getting your foot in the door, seeing what you like. And I think you put in as much work as you want to, you know what I mean? Like, you know, not everybody has to be going like Wednesdays, I have like a bajillion back to back meetings, because all my clubs are like meeting on Wednesdays, like, it doesn't have to be like that, you know what I mean? You can just find one and I think something else that I try and mention is find spaces that are close to you. So it

⁷ Google is an extremely popular Internet search engine.

doesn't have to always be this big giant international organization. Look at what clubs are on your high school or college campus. You know what I mean, scroll through the directory and see what they are. Because if you find one that seems cool, or if you go to the club fair, and you see one that's like, is cool, sign up, you know? And then maybe you could end up running it and then you'll be in touch with the actual bigger organization itself, like just find like the smaller, the smaller pockets before you just jump into the big ones.

Jacobs 27:40

Yeah, no, that's excellent advice. And it definitely makes it more manageable. Because I know that it can be extremely intimidating to try and like enter into something new and really try your hand at it. So to break it down like that definitely makes it a lot easier for people who are really trying to get into the activist space.

Hayempour 27:59

No, totally.

Jacobs 28:00

Yeah. And so do you have anything else that you would like to add or to include, any stories that are really important to you, or anything like that?

Hayempour 28:09

Okay, let me like, speed think off the top of my head. Okay, to the last point, the last thing I'll say is also just like, don't underestimate the power of like, reaching out to people. I think that like, something that I try and remind myself is the worst thing someone can say is no. And if you just send an email, so for example, when I was trying to figure out, okay, how can I put together reusable menstrual kits? I had emailed like a ton of companies. And I was like, you know, I have this grant money can I buy from you at wholesale pricing? Like, you know, for kids, like how does that work? And it was actually one organization that emailed me back and was like, Hey, we don't typically do this, but why don't you check out this organization or that organization. And one of those actually ended up being Days for Girls, which is what I went with. So that like, you know, just email because people always will probably know someone else. I don't think off the top of my head, I have that many more stories just because I think if I do, maybe it'll get like a little too crazy. I mean, through Girls Learn International like through my summer internship, I developed like the mental equity track and our online meeting guidebook. So it's like a set of online resources that basically take you through guided meetings that all the chapters use, and I created the menstrual equity track of that, which is really cool. And I've kind of got to combine my work with Petticoats Rule with that, just because I created a meeting on what period poverty looks like for homeless women, for unhoused women and for incarcerated women. And so my research with homeless women through petticoats row like that was something that I was able to

just kind of combine but off the top - okay, I think I'm gonna cap it there. I might once I see the transcript and might kind of add things a little in there.

Jacobs 29:59

Absolutely.

Hayempour 30:01

But now I think I'm settled for now. Thank you.

Jacobs 30:04

Okay, awesome. And so again, just to clarify with the transcript, you can do whatever you would like to it. And so if you think of anything else that you would like to include, then just once I get it back to you feel free to let me know. And we can add in any other stories or anything else that you want to include. So with that, I think that we are good to go. I'm going to stop the recording and hope that it saves to the computer.