Interview of Yujin Kim by Tate Oliva
November 17, 2023, via Zoom

Yujin Kim is an environmental activist from South Korea and a current student at Duke University. She has worked extensively with the Duke Climate Coalition as well as the UN as a representative of South Korea.

00:00
TATE OLIVA: I apologize, I've been a little bit sick, so if my voice is a little weird, I'm sorry.

YUJIN KIM: You're good. I'm sorry to hear that.

OLIVA: Okay. So, this interview is going to be part of a collection in the Duke Archive that is about documenting youth voices and perspectives that often aren't recorded or held with a lot of weight in academic institutions. Basically, I'll send you a transcript after this it says you can change anything that you want so don't feel like you have to censor yourself. If you mess up on anything, that's totally fine. There are no worries and we're not looking for one specific thing. It's kind of just about you and your stories and whatever you want to bring to the experience. Okay, so to start off, I was wondering if you could just talk a little bit about what activism has looked like in your life?

KIM: Yeah, sure. So I'm a junior now. I came to Duke as a freshman in the fall of 2021. I went to high school in Seoul, South Korea, and I got involved with my local climate activism group the May of 2019 which was late sophomore year for me. I started by showing up to the first protest that I saw in May and the reason why I went was because I had kind of had a lot of buildup of frustration in that kind of all my life I've been pretty environmentally oriented, like I'd yell at people for not recycling properly. I cared a lot about telling people how 'you can save energy by turning the lights off or saving water. That was based on the core belief that if I did my part from where I was, then that would impact people around me. And then those people could maybe impact the people around them. And then that would kind of be the ground-up change. While I was doing that, something would be figured out by all the higher-ups, and people in power. Scientists would be looking for solutions, politicians would be doing what they need to do. So I had a very strong belief that things were gonna work out for the world in terms of all the environmental issues I had been reading about since I was a kid, like global warming. And then in 2018, the IPCC[1] special report came out, that was the first piece of serious type literature that I read, which pretty much outlined that we're kind of screwed though, right?

[1] The IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) is an intergovernmental body of the United Nations whose job is to study human-induced climate change

With the way that we're going right now. Then I discovered that people actually hadn't been doing much, and that caused a really profound sense of betrayal for me. I realized that I had had this belief that I would still have enough time to grow up and become established in whatever I wanted to do, whatever that ended up being, and then I would be able to, in my then position of power, do more impactful things. My belief was that while I was waiting to grow up, other people who were already old enough and impactful enough in their field would be doing what needed to be done for that to be okay. I found out that that was very much not true, which compelled me to look for something more I could do, other than, you know be leading the school sustainability club and doing recycling or whatever. So that's why I went to the protest. I very quickly got involved very heavily. So activism concerned a lot of my life for the rest of high school, junior and senior years. I was the communications coordinator for Youth for Climate Action Korea, which involved a lot of coordinating with other environmental groups nationwide, putting together nationwide strikes a few times a year, running a lot of digital campaigns, and meeting with politicians. We met with presidential candidates and more local candidates. We met with the Minister for Environment. In 2019 I went to the UN climate summit as the South Korean rep to represent South Korean youth. And then, yeah, a whole bunch of other stuff. Then I took more of a step back when I went to college in the US. So now I'm much more loosely involved and have taken a more advisory role. Now I'm a member of the Duke Climate Coalition and the Undergraduate Environmental Union[2].

05:17

OLIVA: Wow, thank you so much for sharing all that. I have a question. You mentioned that you had a lot of these kinds of paradigm shifts of realizing that, “Oh, things are not happening at the rate that I thought they were, or happening as quickly.” I was wondering what kind of shaped your ideals or morals, what created that shift in them? What had informed you before and then what created that shift?

05:50

KIM: Yeah, I think a lot of it was coming across that piece of literature that came out in 2018, the IPCC special report, and the science was really, really clear. My previous belief that things were going to be okay the way they were was largely based on kind of the hope and vibes of what I had gotten from what I read. Then the science was very, very clear once I read that report that: that was actually not the case, that greenhouse gas emissions were increasing at a rate that they weren't supposed to be, and solutions were nowhere near enough where people needed them to be. So I think being forced to face those hard facts and the numbers really was an awakening.

[2] A collective union of Duke undergraduate students tackling climate change and climate justice issues

OLIVA: Yeah, wow. I'm curious about, specifically in UN spaces, how did being that young affect the way that people listened to you or paid attention to you?

07:14
KIM: Yeah, a lot of what I had to push back against and challenge was a dichotomy. If you're a young person trying to be heard, then it's either you're young, you don't know what you're talking about, you're idealistic. Or on the flip side, oh the young people are doing so great, you young people are the hope, you young people please keep doing everything that you've been doing so that you're going to be the future, you're going to be our savior. It was people trying to shift a lot of the burden of advocacy on young people and at the same time, tokenizing young people in other movements. So those were kind of the negative dichotomies. Of course, there were positive actions as well where people really heard us out for what we were seeing, but a lot of what we faced kind of was balanced between those two sides.

OLIVA: Do you think one of those is more detrimental than the other? Do you have an opinion on that?
08:38
KIM: Yeah, that's a really good question. I think it's hard to say. I think the latter is almost more dangerous of saying, ‘oh, young people are the hope’ and then tokenizing and idealizing young people because on the surface it looks like they're respecting you, when that's really not the case. So I think the former is almost easier to combat, just like it's easier to criticize a straight-up climate denier than it is to criticize somebody for pushing false solutions.
09:31
OLIVA: Yeah. I really appreciate that way of thinking about that whole topic because it is, it's more sinister on the surface. I'll grab a sip of water. I'm wondering if you've noticed any differences between climate work that you did back home and the climate work that you've done here and if there were differences in the way that movements were organized or structured? Or the way that politicians interacted with you? Do you have any thoughts on that?
09:57
KIM: I think Duke is obviously a much smaller space than what I'm used to operating on a nationwide scale. So I think there's been a lot more structure in place that's been easier to understand here at Duke. There are way fewer stakeholders, so it's easier to make sense of the way decision-making methods work. And it's also easier to reach the people who are making decisions and people who are in power. At the same time, I think when I'm operating on a nationwide scale, elected officials have a different kind of responsibility to listen to you compared to the advisory board of investing responsibility, which is used by the student body and isn't directly responsible to you as a student. So there are different kinds of implications about the demands you can make. When I was operating in South Korea, it was a lot harder to

just make your voice heard and to figure out what kind of decisions were being made when as a young person, who kind of didn't know the ropes, didn't have anything to pull off of.

11:25
OLIVA: What advice would you give to either younger activists or yourself as a younger activist?
11:55
KIM: Take care of yourself. I got really really burnt out because we were five people doing everything. We weren't leaving until like 3am. It was a really difficult period in my life because I think it's very easy to have imposter syndrome as an activist because you are very value-oriented and value-driven. I think that's why a lot of activists do what they do, which means it's very, very easy to fall into the trap of feeling like you're never doing enough and also never feeling like you're good enough to have the impact that you want to have. And that's super unsustainable. This is something that everyone gets told and everyone knows in theory. I think it's very difficult to give yourself space and let yourself take time off and take care of yourself. But at the risk of saying what probably a lot of other people are saying, that would be my most important piece of advice.
12:51
OLIVA: No, that's really important to hear and I appreciate that. Okay, I'm trying to think. Do you have a person that inspires you to do the work that you're doing or informs your values? Someone that you look up to?

KIM: Yes, I have a very good friend of mine who is one of the five people I organized with back in Korea. She inspires me every time I talk to her. I think when you're organizing, sometimes it's very easy to get caught up in the tasks of what you have to do, that it's easy to forget why you're doing the things you're doing, and to let yourself kind of slip and not go through all the steps of building relationships, of paying attention to everyone getting heard the way they need to be heard, and whether everyone is being respected the way they need to be respected. She is somebody who reminds me that those things should be prioritized. Something I'm guilty of slipping in my life, I guess, to get things done. She is someone who reminds me of that. So I'd say she's one of my biggest friends.

OLIVA: And is she still back in Korea organizing there?
14:31
KIM: Yes.

OLIVA: Do you still get to work with her a bit or at all?

KIM: Yeah, I went home a few times during college and we caught up and then I've helped out with different events so it's been very nice.

OLIVA: That's really cool. It's so important to have other allies and people who are supporting you through all that work. How do you personally deal with feelings of climate anxiety or just generally any hopelessness or feelings like that? Or do you feel that way at all?

KIM: Oh all the time! I think talking about it by far has been my best strategy. To be perfectly honest: I still haven't made peace with the way I feel about how things are going to play out. I think I still struggle a lot with shifting back and forth between despair and anxiety and being in a place where I can have more hope. But by far the one thing is talking to people who have had similar experiences. Rishab for me is one of those people because so many of our conversations have been both of us kind of sitting and being like, 'Yeah, oh crap.' But talking to other people who are on the same page and who are worried about the same things that you are, really, really helps me. I think one caveat of that is it can create a very depressing vibe around the space that you occupy which I think is very true in the environments here. I mean at Duke you can you can keep depressing each other by kind of dumping all of your negative emotions on each other. So I think and that's something that I think I've been guilty of doing to people here who are really important to me. And also at different points in my life. That's something that I try to be very careful about. But I think it's very important to find solidarity in those around you but also to make sure you're not just using them as an emotional trash can. That after a conversation, you can still find value in the fact that, 'Hey, we have each other. And that's something.' For me, it's always been the logic of 'something's better than nothing.' I don't know if we're gonna meet all these long-term goals that you keep reading about, but still, something's fairer than nothing. So you're doing something.

OLIVA: Yeah, and trying to find ways to be hopeful, but also recognize that you can't be hopeful all the time. That's just not feasible.

KIM: Exactly. Yeah.
17:50
OLIVA: I'm trying to think of where I want to go with this. Okay. So, I know that environmental justice is something that I'm sure DCC talks about a lot about or that your work has encountered a lot. What does environmental justice look like to you? Are there visions that you have for the future that incorporate that?
18:20
KIM: Yeah. Again, really big question, something I struggled with a lot. I was recently talking to, again, Rishab, about this. For me, the climate justice movement is the underdog really in any

measure possible, except for one thing, and that one thing is the promise of a better world than what we have right now. I think that's really the only thing that the movement has going for itself is that you're promising people that we're trying to build a world that's less corrupt in how it relies on extracting and excluding different groups of people so that a very small number of other people and corporations can keep rolling the money. For me, justice looks like saying no to collateral damage and saying no to sacrifice zones because if you start taking shortcuts to fulfill whatever number that you need to fulfill, then I think the movement very quickly loses its only edge it has over the current system. For me that looks like saying no to forcing marginalized communities to house infrastructure or facilities that people say are necessary for a renewable energy transition or building a clean energy grid. I still don't know what the logistics of this will be once you have something that's actually feasible, but in principle, that's at least what it looks like.
20:24
OLIVA: Yeah and obviously there's not one answer to the question of what justice looks like, there are many intersectional things. I wanted to ask if we could circle back to talking about DCC and your work with that? I was wondering if there are specific goals or things that you guys have outlined as the main goals of what DCC is working towards?
20:51
KIM: Yeah. Right now, this year, DCC has focused a lot on trying to build cross-sectional solidarity with other justice groups on campus, because that's something that hasn't been done as well as we would have liked in at least the last two years that I've been here. Another thing is really trying to foster a welcoming space within the DCC to be more inclusive of other people, especially for people who are just getting involved, so that the movement has sustainability in terms of having people keep staying involved because being at a school is a very unique environment of having that turnover every four years. A lot of the people who are involved right now are juniors and seniors. Next semester, our two presidents will be graduating seniors. One of the other team members will be abroad, I will also be abroad, so making sure that transition works out.

OLIVA: Yeah. I've heard about work that you guys have done in the past about Duke divestment from fossil fuels. Is there anything that you have to say about that or any thoughts on that?
22:12
KIM: Yeah, the Climate Commitment[3] that got announced last September, all the student environmental groups were blindsided by that. Once that came out, a lot of the work I did more with the UEU (Undergraduate Environmental Union) was getting together all the environmentally oriented groups on campus and putting together a student perspective,

[3] The Duke Climate Commitment is a document that outlines Duke's future plans to become more sustainable and eco-friendly

coming up with student demands and then constantly bringing more conversation with the administration to keep students engaged. The climate commitment honestly gives students a really big edge in the realm of divestment and it's something that we as students calling for divestment have as a big advantage. Duke Administration said Duke is “In it for life” and they're going to do all these great things so it puts them in a really difficult position where they said they're going to do all these things so it really doesn't look that good if they're continuing to give money to fossil fuels. I can't exactly tell how big of a role the Climate Commitment has played, but the SIR has had a change in leadership over the last year, and the new chair has been a lot more receptive to engaging with DCC in a more meaningful way. Yesterday we turned in a literature review on the effectiveness of divestment, which is maybe the third document we prepared for them. That was a lot of work. And I'm really happy that that's over and done with. But I have hope that the conversation will keep leading in a positive way.

OLIVA: Yeah, that's good. Wow, that's very exciting. Congratulations on submitting that. I'm curious about how your family has reacted to you being an activist or working in climate spaces, and what is the has-been-their role in that? Or their reactions?
24:38
KIM: Good question. In high school, there was a period when I super got sucked in and then it really negatively impacted my well-being. I missed too much school my junior year so there was there was a hot minute where I seriously thought I was going to get held back for another year because I had missed too much school. That didn't fit my schools public policy. My parents were pretty unhappy about that because they were supportive of me being involved in activism, but they were concerned that it was impacting my well-being so much. Well, mostly, they've mostly been pretty sensitive.
25:33
OLIVA: Yeah, that's good. Have they responded well to your work here at Duke? Do they follow along with your work or that kind of thing?

KIM: I honestly haven't communicated my work too closely with my family. So once I stopped living at home, they don't really know the nitty-gritty of what I do. But they have a general sense that ‘She's doing some sort of climate work somewhere. We don't know what she's doing. I'm sure she's fine.’ That kind of vibe.

OLIVA: Okay, got it. I was wondering also if you could speak to if you have specific plans for the future or goals for the future with activism?

KIM: I found out after high school that communication is not a good job for me which is really funny because that was my role for two straight years. I found out that I'm not good at

intentional relationship building. I'm not good at coalition building. I'm not good at keeping tabs on who I've emailed and who I need to follow up with. I know now that the minimum level organizing is not my strong suit, which really, really, I think bothered me for a really long time and honestly still does because that is something that I so badly want to be good at and that's something that I so badly want to love because that's where all the power comes from and that's where all the impact comes from. But a lot of the tasks that are integral to community organizing like the communication stuff that I mentioned are not ones that I enjoy or are good at. Whatever I end up doing, I know advocacy will be a big part of it just because I think that's who I am. But I whatever I end up doing in the future, I don't think it will be a full time community communication. So I guess we'll find out where that goes. My interests are largely in population ecology and how people's knowledge, traditional knowledge, traditional ecological knowledge, indigenous knowledge, can contribute to the scientific methodology. And I've really enjoyed doing different types of research here at Duke. So we'll see where that takes me in the future.
28:16
OLIVA: Thank you so much for just your vulnerability on that because it's a hard thing to say that, 'Oh, I'm not good at this thing that I really want to be good at.' So thank you. What gives you hope for the future?
28:34
KIM: Every time I get asked that question, it makes me really happy because I love that question.

OLIVA: Oh, I'm glad I asked it. Okay.

KIM: Other people who I see around me, other people who care about similar things as I do, and even if people don't, you know, see themselves as a climate person or an environmentally conscious person or whatever. Other people who are wounded by the reality of social injustice, give me hope, because the more people there are who are really personally wounded by our current social system, are incredible potential catalysts for change. Speaking to those people, talking to those people, give me a lot of hope.
29:34
OLIVA: Has it been hard? I don't know how to word this exactly, but have there been spaces that you've been in that felt a lot more helpful, hopeful versus other ones? And lhow does the space that you're specifically working on impact hopefulness? In the UN versus DCC? Is there a difference there? Is there more nuance there?
30:09
KIM: Yeah. Um, that's another really great question. There, I think spaces, spaces like DCC where a lot of the people I'm working on on a daily basis are on the same page as I am in terms

of, ‘Oh shit, we're all young people, we don't know what we're doing.’ There are similar obstacles they're facing that I think being in those types of spaces give me a lot of hope because there's a lot of solidarity that can come out of that. And there is also a lot of. ‘Oh, it's okay to not know how to do anything.’I guess the more difficult spaces to be in are other spaces that are not that. So spaces where you are a minority in terms of what you care about and spaces where you're actively antagonized, I guess, are more difficult to navigate.

31:09

OLIVA: I'm also curious about, I know that a lot of these movements, or at least I think are largely youth-centered around youth voices and that kind of thing, but I'm wondering if you've had mentors or if there are people that are not college students that are doing work with DCC, or having elders or mentors and what has their role been? What has those relationships looked like? If you could speak on that.

31:39

KIM: For DCC, we worked a lot closer with the grad students last year. This year, we're basically only worked with undergrads. For me personally, that's a good question. Thinking of the space I was in in Korea, a lot of people in their late 20s, early 30s, who weren't as patronizing as a lot of activists from older generations, not to be discriminatory. I think people who were like in the late 20s, early 30s space, tended to be a little less patronizing, although that's not always true. But a lot of those people, I think, showed me what activism can look like as a full-time, not vocation, but as a full-time commitment. I think that was really insightful for me because at that time the rate that all of us were burning ourselves out it kind of felt like burning paper where you get you can get a really good flame with paper but it lasts about half a minute and looking at those people kind of felt like looking at embers or those like really sturdy logs that will last you a really good time. So I would say yeah a lot of people I met in those spaces were sort of in mental goals at different periods of my life.

33:39

OLIVA: You mentioned burnout multiple times and I wondered if we could touch on that. If that's if you feel comfortable with that. How did you restore yourself or restore your drive to like work in something that is so draining and can burn you out so easily?

34:09

KIM: I step back a lot and I just need to not think about it for a good while for me to have the energy again. Then at that time, the space that we had created for ourselves ended up being so toxic in that everyone in the team always felt guilty and always felt bad that they weren't doing enough and letting that burden fall on the other people. All five of us were feeling that way at any given time, which just creates a little bit of terrible space. So I think stepping away from that entire space for a little bit helped me re-center.

OLIVA: Yeah. That makes sense. And then I just have another question about going back to the kind of idea of like mentors. Do you see yourself as a mentor to anyone in any space?

KIM:Sure, I hope that I can be. I think mentorship is not as big of a deal as I had originally thought it was. I think different people can serve as mentors to other people really, regardless of the relationship or in capacity or duration or whatever, I hope that in any space that I'm in, I can, if that's something that people need, I hope I can be that voice that reminds people to take care of themselves and those around you. I'm really grateful that other people have expressed that sentiment that they were helped by me in different spaces in those aspects. So I'm really grateful to have been that influence.

OLIVA: Yeah, that's probably a good feeling to see the ripples of your work or your presence. I think those are all the questions I have for you today. If there's anything else you want to like speak on or just bring up for the Duke archive?
36:23
KIM: One thing that I'm really interested in suing is the way I perceive it, Duke right now is not a super engaged space compared to what it was maybe a while ago for example when students were protesting the apartheid[4] in way back in late 60s and even in the early 2000s. In the time that I've been here over the three years, it might just be that I wasn't as aware of what was going on in my first year. But I also think there's been an increase in student voices and spaces where students can speak up and ask them what they care about, become more robust in the last few years. So I'm really excited to how this shift, whether that shift ends up materializing and what that looks like in the future.

OLIVA: That is such an interesting idea. Personally I agree, I don't see Duke as this super involved activism, political school, but if it is trending in that direction, that's so exciting and will be really cool to watch over the next years or in the future. Okay, well I think that's all. I really appreciate you taking the time to do this. Thank you so much and I will send you the transcript as soon as I can.

KIM: Sounds good. Yeah, thank you for the conversation. I had a great time. Thank you so much.

OLIVA: Me too. All righty, have a good day.

[4] Apartheid was a system of institutionalised racial segregation that existed in South Africa and South West Africa from 1948 to the early 1990s

Index