

Youth Activist Interview - Mary Catherine Hanafée LaPlante

Interviewer: Jessie Rievmán

Date: September 16th, 2021

Mary Catherine Hanafée LaPlante is an environmental and women's rights activist. A freshman at Harvard University, LaPlante was first introduced to activism in April of her sophomore year when she was accepted into a leadership program called the "Hurley Fellowship." She then began her path into environmental activism by interning for the US Environmental Protection Agency, where she worked with the water crisis in Flint, Michigan. She also served as the Finance Director for the Illinois Youth Climate Movement, leading massive strikes in Chicago. In addition to her environmental activism, LaPlante became the youngest rally organizer in the country by organizing Chicago's Period Rally. She continued her women's rights advocacy by being a youth organizer for the Women's March in Chicago and by working against period poverty with She Wrote Illinois. Working on large-scale rallies such as the Period Rally and also in smaller-scale movements such as the fight for school counselor reforms, LaPlante has found her space as a youth activist.

JESSIE RIEVMAN - 0:00

Hi Mary Catherine. Thank you so much for meeting with me. I asked you to talk with me today because youth activists, such as yourself, have made such a crucial impact in advocating for change in our society. I'm so excited to learn more about your involvement with activist movements. So over the next hour, I'm just going to ask you some questions about your history with activism, and also what you hope to accomplish in the future. And just to learn a little bit about yourself. To get started, if you can, please just tell me a little bit about yourself. What's your name, your age, where you're from, where you're at school, and anything else that you want to share?

MARY CATHERINE HANAFÉE LaPLANTE - 0:42

Sure. My name is Mary Catherine Hanafée LaPlante. I go by MC. I am from a suburb of Chicago called Mount Prospect, Illinois. And I'm currently going to school at Harvard—out in Cambridge. I kind of focused my efforts on environmental activism, but I have done a lot of political activism as well—so, I definitely work in that intersection. And in my free time, I love playing sports. I play basketball, softball, lacrosse, and then I'm also really into singing, just for fun, and doing those sorts of things.

RIEVMAN - 1:23

Great—thank you so much for sharing, and congratulations on Harvard. That's amazing. Now to get into a little bit of the activism you were just talking about—especially with your

environmental activism—can you just talk to me a little bit about which movements you're passionate about and what you've done as a youth activist within those different movements?

LaPLANTE - 1:46

Yeah, of course, so you wanted to hear about my environmental activism?

RIEVMAN - 1:50

You can talk about whatever you want—environmental activism, and I know you're involved in a couple other things. So please, share your everything if you can.

LaPLANTE - 1:59

Okay. I guess it's environmental activism. I'm super interested in environmental racism: that is the phenomenon in which people who are low income or are people of color are often disproportionately affected by climate change. For example, in Chicago, a lot of the low income neighborhoods, which are disproportionately people of color, are located near industrial areas and areas that get a lot of air pollution and things like that. I really focused a lot of my work on that in high school — for example, within the Flint, Michigan crisis¹ that I'm sure everyone knows about. I interned at the US Environmental Protection Agency, and I actually worked in the water division that directly dealt with that issue. If you remember from the crisis, there was a lot of controversy over how the environmental agency handled that situation. I was working closely with the whistleblower who actually broke the case and went to the newspapers about the issue because his managers weren't listening to him. It's really just an extraordinary experience to be able to work in that office. He talked to me a lot about how the reason that the Flint, Michigan case wasn't really being talked about as much at the time or wasn't being dealt with was mostly because a lot of the citizens of that town were low income. And because they didn't have the wherewithal or the education level to understand the change of their water supply from Lake Michigan, I think, or another lake, to the Flint River, they didn't understand these ramifications as most people wouldn't. So, they weren't able to advocate for themselves. That's why it's so important to work on education and advocate for those who may not be able to advocate for themselves. That's what he did, and so I use his work to inspire a lot of my work. I worked really closely for the Illinois Youth Climate Movement, which was the foremost youth organization for climate in Illinois. We organized huge strikes, with like 20,000-30,000 people. I was the finance director for them. We've worked a lot to hold these rallies in Chicago that uplifted the voices of black and brown people. I'm white, and oftentimes a lot of people who have the time and the money to be able to spend extra time doing a ton of environmental activism, especially in Chicago where it's super segregated, tend to be white kids. We really wanted to make sure that

¹ The Flint, Michigan water crisis was a health emergency that occurred in Flint when its water supply was contaminated with lead.

<https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/04/20/465545378/lead-laced-water-in-flint-a-step-by-step-look-at-the-makings-of-a-crisis>

just because we are privileged, and I'm going to be honest, a lot of our team was white, we are using our position to uphold those that are really being affected. A big aspect of my work was making sure that I was stepping back a lot because I'm not as affected—even close to as affected—as other people. I would step back and allow other people to take the microphone. I would run things behind the scenes, and make sure that they were safe and have this space. That was a lot of the work that I did — working in that intersection.

RIEVMAN - 5:36

That's great. It sounds like you've done so much great work, especially through what you're talking about with the Flint water case and everything else. I'm really excited to continue hearing more about that. Are there any other movements that you have been engaged with as well? Or has that been your primary focus?

LaPLANTE - 5:55

I would say that was a big time focus, but then going on a women's rights route, I was really involved with the menstrual equity movement. I organized the first Menstrual Equity Rally² in Chicago. We were featured on Fox News, PBS, and we have a WCW special done on us. It was a really cool experience. I was able to learn more about people who face poverty, and also learn how to organize a huge rally. It was insane. We were sponsored by the Women's March, and we had a lot of support from really experienced women leaders in the Chicagoland area. It was a really transformative experience to be organizing this at the age of 16, have such a huge turnout, and be able to get my message out there. We also donated over 400-500 packages of menstrual hygiene products to local shelters that were in need. That was just another thing that I did.

RIEVMAN - 7:04

That's awesome. Can you tell me any more about the rally and your role in it? You did say you organized it — what did that entail? What did you end up doing?

LaPLANTE - 7:15

I was the head rally organizer. I wrapped together a team of around 20 youth activists in the Chicagoland area that I found through networks or that I heard of, and then we had to organize and get a permit for the rally. Then we had to get microphone systems, do advertising, start going on TV, organize a speaker list, and do a lot of outreach to find speakers. We ended up getting a comedian who has performed on Broadway many times, an Emmy winning producer, and a lot of other really esteemed people. That was kind of amusing — just contacting politicians. I did all of that and was very successful. We had, I think, 400 people show up — it was great. After that, I worked with “She Wrote Illinois,” which is a political action committee that I'm on the Board of Directors for, to pass legislation in Illinois that put into law that menstrual hygiene products had to be available in every restroom in high school and in college, and that women in prison had to

² Also referred to as the “Period Rally.”

have adequate amounts of menstrual hygiene products available to them. We also passed legislation for homeless shelters to ensure that homeless shelters were given access to these menstrual hygiene products. It was kind of a two pronged approach. I did the rally and then was able to connect with “She Wrote Illinois” through the rally — that’s when they asked me to be on their board. Then I was able to do work with them throughout the past two years to finally get out of the station and create real change. That was really exciting.

RIEVMAN - 9:04

Wow, I'm so impressed. Between advocating within rallies and also actually being able to pass things, you've done so much for the Women's Rights movement and as you were talking about before, for environmental movements. Can you go into a little more detail on how you were able to get involved in all these different movements, especially because you have held such esteemed positions within the movements? How did you start getting involved?

LePLANTE - 9:33

Maybe this sounds a little silly, but in comparison to a lot of other youth activists I know, I would say got into the game a little bit late. Freshman and sophomore year, I didn’t do any activism. I was just going along with my high school career: I played sports and I did well in school, but besides that, I really didn't do anything. Then, when I was 16, April of my sophomore year, I applied for the Hurley Fellowship. Unfortunately, it's no longer running. Essentially, they choose 30 girls from across Canada, the United States and South America to fly into New York City for free and meet with some of the foremost women leaders in the world. I just applied thinking there’s no way — like 1% (get in). But, I somehow ended up getting in, and I was like: what is going on right now? All the girls I went with have started their own nonprofits, were on TV, and had been recognized by Obama. And I was like: what am I doing here? I was able to meet Amanda Gorman there. I don't know if you know her, but she’s the poet who spoke at the inauguration, so that was an amazing experience. That snapped me into some kind of trance where I was like, oh, I can do this. They saw something in me and they wanted me here. So I can do this. So, that's kind of where it started from. They gave me a grant to actually start my own organization, so I started an environmental nonprofit. I got a lot of leadership training from them, a lot of support, and a great network of people. So, it kind of started from that. And then, this is so cliché, but, I'm just a hard worker. You have to really work hard and make sure you’re networking and impressing the people that could get you to the next level. So I actually got involved in the Period Rally through the Hurley Fellowship—a previous Hurley Fellow was the one who was the National Coordinator for it. She needed somebody in Chicago, so I volunteered. And because we were both Hurley Fellows, she said: yes, of course. From there, I think I made a name for myself in the Chicago community, and then was asked to be on the Board of Directors. And then from there, I was able to get some guidance and created my nonprofit. And then from there, I was able to connect with the Illinois Times. It just all kind of spidered out from that experience. There was no plan—I just went with it when opportunities were handed to me. And

somehow I ended up with at heart. It's just so weird to me—I was never that person. So it's definitely weird, but I'm so grateful for it. I surprisingly found a passion for it and learned that I was really good at it.

RIEVMAN - 12:43

That's great. That fellowship seemed like such an amazing opportunity. And also I do agree, sometimes you start getting involved in things and it spirals and now you're where you are now. You've done phenomenal things for the movement. Thank you for all that you've done. I want to hear a little bit more about the environmental organization you created, which you touched on a little when you were talking about that. Can you tell me a little about how it got started, which I know you mentioned a little through the fellowship, and what you were able to do through that?

LePLANTE - 13:18

The whole focus of that fellowship was to create a passion project. It took me a really long time, but I settled on pesticide use in my community, because I knew that about 10 years prior, a group of concerned moms in my community had gone to our local school district and complained about the pesticide use. A lot of pesticides are being used on the grounds where children were playing — pesticides are not good for you at all. I remember they got completely shut down—like nothing happened. They didn't change their ways at all. I was thinking, and I remember this event, and I was like: what if I just gave it a shot? That was my business plan—so to speak—to try to eliminate pesticides and herbicides from my local town. I had a lot of meetings with my local school district and my local park fishers. They did not want anything to do with it. That's the thing that we talked about with activists (these or in general)—that you're going to fail a lot. It probably took me 10 meetings to just keep going back and do anything. I think at that point, they were just like: let's just throw this girl a bone. She just needs to get out of my office right now—just do whatever. I was really persistent. I was able eventually to get them to do a sample plot to test out a natural pesticide alternative, and then compare it to the pesticides and see if—although (it) wasn't meant to be as effective as pesticides, because I knew that if it was good enough to be used instead of it—that would be healthier. I was able to coordinate a study with my school and my park district, and we were able to conduct that study. It's a really long process, but they are right now analyzing the results of the study. Just kind of amazed—it was actually a positive looking study. That was a big aspect of it—stretching them to do anything over it. That was a big win. Also, I distributed seeds to a lot of my community, so they could plant native gardens in their own in their own yards. I also presented about my project to a lot of different local horticulture experts, and I was mentored by a natural horticulture expert who is helping me try to transition to a different system in the park district. It's ongoing—it's a lot of technical stuff that I don't want to get into, really—but that was the goal of the project. I was also able to talk to Jane Goodall about the project and was able to kind of get her insight as well. It has just been a really interesting experience, and not necessarily—to be honest—the most successful thing I've done because we haven't gotten there yet, but it's still ongoing. It's so important to know that just

because something isn't necessarily going to be accomplished right now, doesn't mean you shouldn't keep working on it and make those little baby steps. Because you know, (I'm) just starting to study the huge stuff. If somebody else in my community wanted to come behind me and do something else—just edging your way forward is a really good game plan for things like this.

RIEVMAN - 16:57

I really love that perspective, because that is something that in activism a lot, you do see failure, but you have to be persistent. I really love your positive attitude and your persistence, especially as you're talking about the group you started. Jumping off of that, to other people who are aspiring to be activists—do you have any other advice, besides the fact that you need to continue pushing forward, that you want to share?

LePLANTE - 17:26

I think that something that people tend to overlook in general, whether it's in school, extracurriculars, activism, or anything, is that social connections aren't just that you hang out with your friends when you're not doing work. It's important that your teachers like you and respect you, it's important that your parents have respect for you, and it's important that the members of your community have respect for you because that's going to be what gets you to the next level. I think a lot of people are like: if I just study really hard, I'll be fine. If I just work really hard, I'll be fine. But the reality is that the world doesn't really work like that. The world works by, first, I have heard about this person and this person will be a good thing for that. It's all about who people know, what they think, and what their opinion is of you. One thing that I definitely worked on that genuinely helped me a lot with just getting better at the small talk—knowing how to, if you're in a networking event, talk to people that are 16 years old and you have nothing in common with. Things like that, and just being somebody that people can rely on and somebody that people can trust. Because that kind of reputation—you can't fake that. No matter how hard you work, no matter how hard you study, if you're not somebody that people like and if you're not somebody that people trust, you're not going to get very far. So I think that's the biggest piece of advice I can get and it is something you can work on. That's a good thing—it's not like IQ, where you can't really change that. You can totally work on your social skills in professional settings and set yourself up for success. But I think it's something that a lot of people don't really talk about. That's the foremost thing that I would say—the best thing I would do.

RIEVMAN - 19:22

Thank you so much for sharing that. I do agree it's really important when you step out of the classroom to work on actually talking to people instead of just studying. It's a great point that you brought up. Going back to when you were talking about how important it is to establish these social connections, and you also were talking about this a little bit before, are there any

people that you think really were influential in helping you get involved? And what kind of connections have you made with people that's changed your perspective on activism movements?

LePLANTE - 19:57

Actually, with this question, I'm going to change gears a little bit, because I forgot I didn't talk about this project. So, I guess I'll introduce this other project that I did.

RIEVMAN - 20:08

Go ahead.

LePLANTE - 20:10

That has people that were my biggest mentors, I think. I actually did a project with my counselors in my school. Basically, all our counselors were notorious for being awful in my high school—everybody knew that they were just so bad. They would be like: somebody would come to me, I'm really sad. This sucks. And they would call their parents and stuff like that. It was just really weird. So at some point, I was like: enough is enough. I was just already in the activism sphere, so I was like: I'm just going to do something about this too. I actually organized a study through my school and I wrote a research paper on it. Essentially, we studied how the impact of one-on-one meetings with freshmen would be if they had it with their counselors in the beginning of the year. Essentially, my school didn't even do that. My school didn't even have meetings with a counselor and a freshman in the first few months of school. And I just thought, that's so important if you want to build a level of trust with your kids of four years and a level of rapport. You want to meet with them right away one on one, because before, they would just do it in a big gymnasium or something—so I thought that was stupid. I organized a study, and one of the people that was my biggest supporter was my vice principal—she was incredible. She would work with me after school and help me with certain aspects of the study. She was in charge of the counselors, so if she didn't say yes to this, then it (the study) wouldn't have occurred. She was just my biggest supporter in and out of school. So, I really look up to her so much—she's just such a kind person. As soon as I walked into her office and proposed it, she was immediately like: yeah! I don't think I've ever met an adult that willing to place their bets on—I was like 16 at the time. It was a big project—it wasn't just like a little thing. She had to spend a lot of time, I had to spend a lot of time, and the counselors had to take a lot of time out of their schedule to work to do this and to meet with everybody. That was an amazing experience. And then, I was actually able to present this at the Illinois School Counselor Association's annual conference. I was the first student that they'd ever invited to present anything there. I had a whole session with—I was being followed by one of the foremost psychologists in the United States. I was like: this is crazy. The President of the Illinois School Council Association actually was my second biggest mentor. He, again, was kind of the same way—just so open to a kid coming in and doing a study and saying you're doing this wrong. Just for an adult to be like: yeah, we

probably are, tell us what to do, was just incredible. They're my two biggest remodels. I still text both of them a lot and just ask for advice. They're just awesome. I think if I hadn't had them two throughout the process, and they both wrote recommendation letters for me, which I think also really helped with my college application process. I genuinely don't think if I hadn't met them or been really close to them that I would have gone as far, because they just showed me what kind of leader I wanted to be. That I want to have humility, know that I can obviously be wrong, and that people coming up behind me are going to be better than me, and that's okay. You know?

RIEVMAN - 23:58

That sounds great. Just elaborating a little bit on what you briefly mentioned with the psychologist who was keeping tabs on you and working with all these esteemed adults: how did you feel as a 16-year-old, and now I'm assuming an 18-year-old, about being the youngest one in the room, but still being the one advocating for change?

LePLANTE - 24:19

I think that's a common theme that I see in my life is I am a lot of the time one of the youngest or the youngest in the room. It's interesting because I think it almost emboldens me a little more. I have this mentality: well I'm here for a reason. I'm here. There's a reason I'm the only kid in this room—there's a reason why there are all these adults. I'm here to bring some kind of change. I'm here to be the odd one out anyway, so I might as well just be crazy with it. Maybe (it) isn't the right mentality to have, but I never struggled with bringing up the issues I saw and working with it. Again, I think part of that comes from these adults really have to respect you in order for them to listen to you and implement your strategies. So being the youngest one in the room, I also had an understanding that I needed to be really professional and come across in a very adult way, which can be a little intimidating for sure. Obviously, you're a 16 year old—most of the time, you're just mad about other 16 year olds who are very immature and whatever. It's a big shift to have to go from that to a working world and be in those kinds of rooms—those big conference rooms with leather chairs. It's definitely a shift, but one thing that really helped me was dressing the part. Whenever I would go into one of these meetings or meeting somebody, I would always dress super professionally, mostly because it just made me feel like a badass. I would just go in—I was awesome. I would put on makeup. I would just feel super confident. And that kind of elevated me and my mentality. That's a big thing, too—just dress for success. It's so important. Obviously, the inside is what matters, but the outside can make your inside better, if that makes sense. You know?

RIEVMAN - 26:26

Thank you for sharing that. I do agree dressing for success really does make you feel the part, so that's good advice, especially to other young activists who are trying to get super involved. Jumping off of the idea of what you were talking about with your work with your school

counselors, I'm wondering what has been the favorite movement you've been a part of, favorite event you've organized, or any of the highlights of your youth activism which you want to share?

LePLANTE - 26:58

My favorite thing—I didn't mention this before—but as a result of my study, now all the freshmen in my entire district, which is the largest school district in Illinois—has 13,000 kids—meets with their counselor now this year because of the study that I did. That was such a cool feeling to know that I changed the lives of that many people—it's crazy. Honestly, that would be like my favorite thing, because it's such a big number and a quantifiable number. I also think that the Period Rally, just because it was my first activism thing, really does hold a special place in my heart. I just remember being so terrified—everything was so scary because I didn't know what I was doing. I was somehow organizing this rally. I had no clue. I remember the night before the rally, I was almost in tears. I was like: no one is going to show up—I was just so scared. That rally also took probably 200 hours of my time in like two months—it was a lot. I was doing it every single second I got. I would wake up at like 5am to make sure I was texting speakers, co-hosts, presenters, and the security people. It was just insane. I'm really proud of myself for the amount of work I put into it, how successful it was, and that it was like my first thing, so that definitely holds a really special place in my heart.

RIEVMAN - 28:42

The work you did on that rally sounds incredible. I'm so happy that everything worked out well for you, and that you were able to get a huge turnout, because it is such an important thing to be fighting for. So, I thank you for all the work you did with that. I'm wondering, so now you're at Harvard, what are you planning on doing in the future? How are you planning on bringing your activism to Harvard or even outside of the school? What do you see for yourself?

LePLANTE - 29:13

Right now at Harvard, I'm definitely trying to take it one day at a time. It's a little overwhelming. Everything here is very crazy, in a good way. I'm not focusing too much on extracurriculars right now—I'm just trying to get my schooling down and have my social network down. I'm majoring in econ and environmental science right now with a secondary political science. So basically, I'm setting myself up to be either a consultant or some kind of public policy consultant, or making a decision, or possibly just going into economics. I'm really interested in the intersection between economics, environmental science, and climate change to see how a business perspective can be taken on climate change, so that we can make real strides. Because unless it's economically viable, we're not going to be able to make those strides. Kind of like my focus right now, I think—just taking it one step at a time. I'm joining the Institute of Politics, which does a lot of great things with the Kennedy School³. We host a lot of events with amazing speakers and politicians, so I'm definitely looking down the political route for sure. Just kind of keeping my

³ Public Policy School of Harvard University

options open and taking it one day at a time because I definitely did a lot in high school. So, I think it's important to slow down and just because I did activism in high school or because like I did environmental things in high school, doesn't mean that I have to continue on that path. I can always go a different route, and I think I want to be very cognizant of that. I want to allow myself to see what feels right now, because it is a time of transformation. So I'm just taking it very slowly. That's my game plan right now.

RIEVMAN - 31:01

That's a good mindset to have, especially because you did do so much during high school. Just going back to the previous work you've done, I'm also wondering: is there anything, any activist movement you were in or any work you did, which if you could go back you would change? Or you would come in with a different mindset?

LePLANTE - 31:26

That's a good question.

RIEVMAN - 31:28

Sorry if I'm stumping you a little bit.

LePLANTE - 31:31

No, you're fine. Yeah, you are stumping me just a little bit, but it's ok. I'm just trying to think. I know one answer, but I'm just trying to think of a better one. I think that it's actually interesting because I was just talking about the Period Rally and it was a great experience, but I think that I definitely had a very naive perspective on activism, because the reality is that a lot of students do activism because they want some kind of power or they want to get into a good school. Some people are like that—some people kind of go into it for power. I didn't know that and I also didn't know that I needed to be aware of it and watch out for it. Essentially, with the Period Rally, the woman who actually was the head of the organization Period⁴, which is who we were working with—her name is Nadya Okamoto. She actually went to Harvard as well. A year after the rally, in 2020 during the Black Lives Matter movement, a girl came out and said that she had exploited her work, had used her logo, and had stolen a lot of ideas. So Nadya actually was kicked out of the organization by the Board of Directors and was blacklisted almost. First of all, it surprised me a lot because I knew Nadya pretty well. But also, as things started coming out, I started seeing a lot of things that probably I should have seen earlier, maybe if I wasn't so naive. I should have been seeing that. Oh, okay, I understand—I wouldn't have been blindsided if I'd been paying attention. With the Chicago Period Rally, they were working with, I want to say H&M or some retailer or something like that. They were working with them to give extra

⁴ PERIOD. is an organization devoted to combating “period poverty.” They donate feminine hygiene products to those who are unable to afford them. <https://period.org/>

funding to 10 of the rallies. Being from Chicago, one of the biggest cities—third biggest in the country—I really wanted that funding because I knew that we could use it for sure. But, because I was kind of a late addition and because Nadya didn't know me very well, even though I put in an application, she didn't give me the money. Instead, she gave it to kids at UC Berkeley where they had a rally of like 20 people and they gave them like \$2000-\$3,000. And I was like: why do you need that? So the thing was very clear that she was giving it out to people that she knew and people that were her friends who were organizing it. That kind of corruption obviously is not okay. I don't think she was expecting our rally to go well because I was the youngest rally coordinator in the country. All of the other cities were being organized with women who were way older, so I think she didn't expect much. And we actually had one of the most successful rallies. So after that, she started promoting our photos and saying: "Look how good Chicago's doing." She was texting me more and things like that. So looking back on it, it was very clear what was going on. I don't know if I could have done anything differently—I think I did everything I wish I could have done, but it just left a little bit of a bitter taste in my mouth. It definitely broke my innocence around the activism movement because there's good sides, but there's also bad sides. There's a reason why everybody is doing this really non-traditional path, especially so young. And so, it's important to be mindful.

RIEVMAN - 35:43

Going off of what you were talking about with how you were the youngest organizer throughout the entire country, what has it been like facing that adversity of people not taking you seriously because you're the youngest person out there?

LePLANTE - 36:04

I think I face it a lot, but I also think that I get through it by having more knowledge than anyone else. That's the way that I face it. For example, with the pesticide school issue I was working with, I was talking and in meetings with literal groundskeepers who had gone to college for environmental-like things. I think when I first came in, they were very simple, like: what does this girl know about this? But, I did Science Olympiad all throughout middle school and high school, and I was actually the state champion in the ecology events two times and the regional champion for 10 straight years. So, I know a lot about the subject. I think they were skeptical, until I was able to use terms and things that were very technical, and use that kind of language. They clearly knew what I was talking about. That's the best thing I find is that the reason that people don't take young people seriously is because they don't think they have the experience and the knowledge. So, if you just show them that you have the knowledge and the experience, then they can't say no to that, because that's the main issue. Always coming prepared, always dressing up, always making sure that I do my research before any meeting that I need to, always making sure that I'm expressing myself in the right way and in a respectful way, and I'm announcing my words—just little things like that separate you. The first time that you ever go in, the first

time they see you, they might have that reaction: oh, she's young. But, you just put yourself in that kind of situation and make sure you're prepared, they're going to forget that you're just 16.

RIEVMAN - 38:06

I'm so impressed by all the work you put in for all the little things, especially even every meeting—just the amount of research you're putting in. So, just jumping off of that point about your research, to what extent do you think (you use) what you're learning in the classroom versus what you're learning in the fields? What do you think about the balance between the two and being able to also apply what you're learning in school to the different experiences you've had?

LePLANTE - 38:35

People laugh at me when I say this, but I don't like school that much. I was never into school—that was never my thing. I don't know, I would say I got good grades just because I knew I needed to for college, but I wouldn't say I'm necessarily a crazy intellectual person. I definitely got in because of my activism work and not because of the other things. I'm going to be honest, with a lot of the subject material, I don't find it crosses over. But I do think that the kind of skills you learn in school, like collaboration, public speaking, socratic discussions, and interacting with teachers—those are the kinds of things that actually mattered to me. I remember I took BC Calculus⁵ my sophomore year of high school, and I think I cried every single week. I hated that class—it was so hard. But, the one thing that I learned from that class was that I could do anything because I'm not a math person. I was taking BC calculus my sophomore year, and I was so determined that I wasn't going to get a B. I was going to get straight A's throughout high school. I remember working—I would get home from school, from extracurriculars at 10 pm, and I would work, work, work. I would wake up at 5 am—work, work, work. Go in to see my teacher—work. Go in, go in—work, work, work. Even though I was not naturally good at all, I was able to skate by with an A and I actually got a 5 on the AP exam. That was genuinely one of the hardest things I've actually ever done. It was so hard, but I showed myself that I could do literally anything. That's something that I definitely learned from school—how to persevere, how to work hard, how to manage your time, and also prove things to yourself. That's actually really important.

RIEVMAN - 40:44

Thank you for sharing that. That's a great perspective to have, and once again, I do see your constant perseverance that you had in activism movements and also just applying to school in general. It truly is impressive. I want to go back to a point you were talking about towards the beginning of the interview which you haven't touched on that much: your work within the Flint Water (Crisis) and the experiences you had within that. Can you describe a little bit more about what you did? And if you have any other movements which you feel like you haven't talked

⁵ Reference to Advanced Placement (AP) Course - considered a “college-level” course

about that much, but you want to go more into? I'm just so interested in learning about everything you've done.

LePLANTE - 41:26

With Flint Water—it was basically an internship with the Environmental Protection Agency. I, for the most part, didn't work on Flint at all. I was mostly just doing data work, inputting spreadsheet things, working on water tables, groundwater sampling, and things like that. About halfway through the internship, I was able to work with Miguel⁶—that's the name of the whistleblower. I was able to read the emails that he (indiscernible) with constituents and I was able to do a lot of constituency work—it was really cool. One thing that was also super interesting was: I was going through a lot of emails, just organizing things for the office and doing intern things. It was so interesting because I was reading everyone's emails and I got to the point where the Flint, Michigan crisis is going on—back to that time period. So, I was able to read all the emails with the coworkers to each other during that time. That was so interesting because a lot of the co-workers were trash-talking Miguel, saying “how dare he go to the press,” “what does he think he's doing,” and stuff like that. These workers weren't fired, only the manager was fired. I was still working with these people who were trash-talking this amazing hero. It was just so interesting. Even in the civil service, even with a bureaucrat, even in an office where you're supposed to be working for the Environmental Protection Agency and you're supposed to be working in the groundwater and drinking water division and you supposedly have a scientific degree. People are still doing these things. It was just a really interesting perspective to get. Also, I had so much more respect from Miguel after seeing the kind of things that he faced.

RIEVMAN - 43:34

That's a really interesting experience. Also, I keep hearing little comments about issues that you've faced with activism as a whole and different problems you see. Would you want to go into anything within current activism which you think should be changed, or that you would like to see a difference in?

LePLANTE - 43:58

I don't know—there's obviously issues with anything. But, I think particularly with this whole youth activism movement, I think it's very recent first of all. There are people who did this earlier, but I think it's like a whole phenomenon now, especially on the East and West Coast I see. I'm from the Midwest, so nobody around me was really doing anything like this, which I think kind of added to my competitiveness almost. But, I feel like if I was in the East Coast or the West Coast, everyone else around me would have been doing the same thing. It's interesting—I think it's because it's a tool to get into college now and it's a tool for your career, which I don't think that's necessarily actually a bad thing. I just think it's different than what it

⁶ Miguel Del Toral

used to be. I think a big issue that I see a lot is that a lot of people want to start things—like let me start an organization and let me start something, and not actually look if they're an existing organization in their community that maybe you should just volunteer, help out, join the board, or things like that. I'm just a bit worried that it's changing a little bit from being just that we want to help people to being now that it's a competitive thing, where it's going to help me get into college. But, on the opposite side, I do really think that if there is going to be some kind of thing that people are going to compete for, it's not a bad thing. Because even if people are doing it, maybe not for the purest of reasons, the whole nature of activism is that you're going to be helping people anyway. So, I don't really mind it. Also, I think it builds a lot of really good skill sets. Being a leader like that and having to do all of those things at a young age, really sets you up for success in the workplace, in college, and all those things. So, in general, I actually don't mind it, but I do think that there is a bit of an issue with that and that kind of controversy. I think that pretty heavily—I think people know that people can see that.

RIEVMAN - 46:13

That's a great point. Touching on what you were just talking about with the skill set that you think you gained—what kind of skill set do you think that your involvement with activism has given you? Also, how do you think you've evolved as a person based on all your work that you've done?

LePLANTE - 46:32

One of the things that I definitely have improved upon is my overall ability to work, because I was just kind of a normal kid. I think that working on activism has given me this superpower to do 100 things at once. Now, I can multitask like no one's business. I will go on record and say that is totally like my superpower. I think that's a great skill that I'm finding, and I'm very grateful for that. That wasn't something I was expecting. I think another thing is public speaking—that's something I've really developed. I remember the first time I ever spoke to a big crowd of people, I was awful. I was so bad. I was talking fast and my pitches were all over the place. But now, I feel completely comfortable with any group of people. I'm a really good public speaker, and I kind of pride myself in that. That's like a great skill to have, that you want. Then again, just dealing with people in professional environments, dealing with different personalities, and having to make sure that everyone's skill sets are being used adequately. I think that's a great skill to have. I think all of these skills are things that are priceless. The younger you can develop it, the better, and the more you can critique it and work on it when you're older. I just think in general—it's such a good exercise for your brain and for doing these things. Thinking outside the box as well and coming up with creative solutions to things. I think it's great.

RIEVMAN - 48:20

It's great you started so young that you were really able to develop those skills. I think you just mentioned something about creativity as well. What kind of creativity do you think you've had to

really embody in order to lead these different movements? Also what's your favorite form of activism? Do you enjoy your in-person protests, through social media, or through getting to have those one-on-one meetings with people like you've had. Which do you think has been both your favorite and most influential?

LePLANTE - 48:58

Touching on the creative aspect—I think that a lot of creative problem-solving, I would say, is a big aspect of activism. No matter what you think you're going to do, you're not going to do that. You're going to do something else—there's going to be an issue and you're going to need to fix it in a timely manner and in a composed manner. So I think that's a great creative thing you get to do. Also, just to come up with an idea and to come up with an event—that is working your brain to the max. I think all of those are just such great examples of creative entities that you are using and doing when you're doing activism. In the sense of what was my favorite one—I really love rallies. I just love that energy. When you're just chanting with other people and having fun walking and doing movement together with signs you can see with music. I just think that's so incredible. I was able to organize the Women's March in 2020. I was a youth organizer for that. That was just such a great experience. The Women's March in Chicago is actually insane. It's like 200,000-300,000 people, and it was nothing like I'd ever experienced before. That's so amazing. I love that thrill. But, then I also really do like genuinely donating, those one-on-one meetings, or making connections with mentors and people and talking through an issue together. I would definitely say that a big crowd is good, but also that intimate problem-solving is also really good.

RIEVMAN - 50:43

That makes a lot of sense. To go back to what you said about being a youth activist for the Women's March—how does that compare with your role during the Period March and any other type of march protests that you've done?

LePLANTE - 51:03

The Women's March was really interesting because that was crazy, just because the Chicago Women's March gets so much press coverage. To be on the main team for that, to be working with all these amazing women, was so cool. Again, being the youth one they were asking about TikTok⁷ or whatever was kind of funny. I don't want to rank on this topic too much, but going back to a little bit of the controversy around activism. Another thing I did see with that group of women was that they were all incredible individually, but I found that when they came together, they were very catty. It's an interesting thing—I definitely just stayed out of it. Even in these crazy, powerful groups of people, and the people doing amazing things, there is still going to be that mental aspect of power-hungriness. Who's the leader, who's in charge, and who's going to be listened to? It's not productive. I think that seeing that makes me know what kind of leader I

⁷ TikTok is a social media app where users can share short clips with one another.

want to be in the future and that I'm not going to be like that. I guess it helps them in that sense. It's a good thing to be exposed to young as well, because I know how to check myself and make sure that I'm not being like that. Then, absolutely count compares. It was a bigger scale than anything I've ever done. The Illinois Climate Movement and the Period Rally were less known than organizations like the Women's March. Everybody knows the Women's March, so it was definitely a lot better attended. It was a totally different scale. But, I think that what's interesting is I definitely had the least control over the Women's March in the sense that I was a board member. Then with the Illinois Climate Strike, I had way more control as the Finance Director because I'm touching all the finances, and then as Head Rally Coordinator (for the Period Rally) I was like everything. It's definitely just a different level of intimacy with a project, and it gives you a different level of satisfaction when it pays off. Definitely even though the Women's March is bigger, I had more satisfaction from the Period Rally than I did from the Women's March. But obviously that was just because I was more involved. Because I was more involved, but I loved all of these experiences in general.

RIEVMAN - 53:42

The more you talk about the different things you've done, it gets so much more impressive. You've really just done so much. I'm wondering, is there anything that you want to share that you think is important, that you haven't touched on about your work with activist movements?

LePLANTE - 54:03

I guess I know one more.

RIEVMAN - 54:06

Go for it.

LePLANTE - 54:07

I also was on the tutor leadership team for my school. I helped organize 150 tutors in my school, make schedules, and made sure that there was a tutoring system. I think that's so important because I needed to be tutored in math so much when I was little, and I was always so embarrassed to be like: "I need a math tutor." It was really cool to have that full circle moment of being in high school and being able to work to destigmatize tutoring and create programming. The tutor program at my school is entirely student run. You'll find me on the board and all of this stuff. I was the marketing director, and I was able to create posters and videos that encouraged people to go to tutoring and share my personal story. That was a really fun project for me to be able to help my fellow peers and do that kind of organizing.

RIEVMAN - 55:07

That's great. Especially being on a college campus too, you know how important tutoring is—that's a really good cause to be involved in. As a final question: I know that you were talking

about how now you're at school, and how your interest in activism might be evolving a little bit. Is there any movement that you think that you would want to get involved in, or any new way of advocating that you see yourself doing in the future?

LePLANTE - 55:44

I definitely do a lot more policy work. I definitely want to work in legislation and do more internships to get on the inside of companies and work to go from the inside out—if that makes sense. A lot of times, I'm coming outside, and I'm trying to affect them from the outside as not a member of the company. But, I also think that something that can be really impactful is working for a company and creating new proposals and changes to the company. It's actually called—there's a term for it—intrapreneur. So, a social intrapreneurs. I think that's what I will definitely be focusing on more in the future and looking for those kinds of opportunities as I enter the professional world and start doing more internships and working for bigger companies. Harvard definitely spits you out into these big financial companies. Even if I end up working for something like that, I'll work inside to change how they do certain things to make it better for everyone.

RIEVMAN - 56:53

That's great. I'm really looking forward to seeing what you do in the future, especially with that new perspective that you're bringing. Is there anything else that you want to talk about or want to share?

LePLANTE - 57:08

No, I think I'm good, but thank you so much. You did an amazing interview—you're awesome.

RIEVMAN - 57:12

Thank you. Thank you so much for meeting with me, and for all the work that you've done, because youth activists truly are some of the most important people right now throughout the world, advocating for necessary changes. I really appreciate all the work that you've done, and seeing what you have accomplished and what you're going to accomplish. I cannot wait to see you in the news one day.

LePLANTE - 57:40

Thank you so much. Oh my gosh.