

# Making Waves POWER SHIFT 2007

by Lisa Hebert

**O**n a Saturday last November, 6,500 high school and college students gathered in a stadium on the University of Maryland campus to hear Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi address the crowd. It was the first day of Power Shift 2007, the largest conference on climate change in U.S. history. Earlier that day, I was among the attendees who participated in panel discussions and workshops addressing such topics as climate legislation, getting youth to vote, making schools green, and other issues related to climate change and global warming. Political activist Ralph Nader also spoke and inspired us to make changes. “We live in the country that has the power to leverage the rest of the world,” he said. “You’re living in the country that has the power and you need to take over.”

When Speaker Pelosi took the stage, she talked about many of the same things that other speakers had: the power that the youth have, how we need to use that power, and how we are doing an amazing, incredible thing by supporting this cause. Initially, she received tremendous applause. However, as her speech continued, a chant rose up that wasn’t as welcoming: “We want more! We want more!” While many people believe that Speaker Pelosi is taking the first steps toward getting green legislation passed, they feel that the government should lower carbon emissions and include higher fuel economy standards in the energy bill. More work needs to be done.

Before Power Shift, I had a vague idea of some of the bigger problems facing our environment—too many cars,

too much carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, trash filling up landfills. When I heard about the conference from a friend at school, I saw it as a chance to learn a little more about global warming problems and maybe figure out something I could do to reduce my footprint on the world.

Power Shift was an event for youth, run by youth. The staff who organized the five days of workshops, panels, and action were either in college or recent graduates. The first few days of activities were all in preparation for a lobbying day on Monday, when we would bring our ideas to Capitol Hill. The goal was to take the climate movement to new levels by educating and empowering youth and making our voices heard around the country and in government.

## **Congregating in the Lobby**

On Monday morning, Power Shifters went to Capitol Hill, gathered in the committee room, and waited for a hearing of the Select Committee on Energy Independence and Global Warming, a committee of 15 congresspeople started in 2007 by Speaker Pelosi to address global warming and America’s oil dependence. We filled all the seats and took up all the standing room available, spilling out into the hallway.

We wanted Congress to adopt the standards of the 1 Sky Campaign: create five million green jobs, resulting in a 20% conservation of energy by 2015; cut climate pollution levels to 80% by 2050; and invest in renewable energy and end the development of new coal plants that emit global warming pollution. Five young people presented testimony, including Billy Parish, co-founder and coordinator of Energy Action, a coalition of more than 40 environmental groups across North America. The most moving moment of his presentation was when Representative Edward Markey asked him, “Do you think that this is something the youth will rally behind?” The room erupted with shouts, whoops, and applause. After it died down, Billy said with a smile, “I guess so, then.”

Feeling triumphant, we quickly broke into our groups by state and district and dispersed all over the Hill. The goal was to track down our senators and representatives to advise them to vote for a clean energy bill.

There were at least a hundred people gathered in the Russell Senate Office Building when I arrived. We waited

Power Shifters prepare to lobby their Congressional representatives.



for Jackie Ball, legislative assistant to Senator James Webb from my home state of Virginia, to emerge. When it was time for the meeting to begin, leaders of school environmental groups from all over Virginia spoke. Again, we presented the 1 Sky Campaign and asked if we could count on Senator Webb's support for it. From talking with Ms. Ball, it seemed as though Senator Webb would support the standards included in the platform. We were fired up as we headed to the rally.

### The Ripple Effect

As I walked down the hill to the lawn in front of the Capitol building, I could see the vast expanse of people covering the space in front of the large stage. They were carrying signs: NO NEW COAL, GREEN JOBS, and BRING 35MPG TO THE MOTOR CITY. One of the speakers began chanting into the microphone, "Climate action now!" and the crowd joined in. There was music, chanting, cheering, and dancing as news crews filmed and interviewed participants. When we saw people streaming out of the Capitol building to see what all the commotion was about, we knew our voices were being heard.

I spent the rest of the afternoon racing around Capitol Hill with other Virginia students lobbying representatives and senators. Our suggestions for the energy bill weren't always well received. For example, we spoke with one representative who seemed to agree with us on the issues. But then he said that although the goals we had were admirable, it would be nearly impossible to reach them because of such factors as the auto industry's desire for big profit and government bureaucracy. It became apparent to me then that doing what is right isn't always the deciding factor for lawmakers.

Sometimes it seems like no one person can make any real difference—no one vote is going to tip an election, no one person can change the world. But when I thought about the rally that day, I realized that one person can easily inspire five people, each of whom can in turn inspire five more. Soon enough, thousands of people could be fighting for a cause and affecting the passage of a bill or the election of a candidate.

### A Shift in Awareness

As a generation, as a people, as inhabitants of Earth, we have a responsibility to preserve our planet for ourselves and for others. There are things happening right now that run counter to this duty. For example, mountain top removal is the clearing of forests and the use of dynamite to blow away part of the mountain and expose the coal



Students rally on the front lawn of the Capitol building.

underneath. Though profitable, this is terribly damaging to the mountain's ecosystem, as well as the surrounding mining communities and towns. The process does not employ many people, but it does require the use of toxic chemicals and carcinogens that contaminate the air people breathe and the water they drink. The coal dug up in this process is also a major pollutant: burning coal results in smog and soot, and the process results in sludge and more toxic chemicals. Additionally, low fuel-efficiency standards make it easy for auto companies to build and market cars like the Hummer H2 that get very few miles per gallon of gas, producing more pollution in a shorter amount of time. The climate change problem may seem like a dire situation, and in a lot of ways it is. But Power Shift taught me that although things may seem very bad, that's no reason to give up hope.

About a month after the conference, I was seeing Power Shift referenced everywhere—blogs, magazines, television, radio, and even in conversation. What took place during those few days had made a huge impact—a massive wave of consciousness stemming from actions taken by youth. We had accomplished one goal: to raise awareness not only while we were there, but for months afterwards. That, I realized, is what success means: not just making a difference with what you did at the time, but having that ripple out to inspire others and make a difference in the world long afterward. ■



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