JUSTIN was an underfunded alderman running for mayor of New Haven. He was young, lanky, and brimming with idealism. He had published 75 different policy papers on his website, promising an honest, forthright, and thoughtful approach to development, crime, and education in the city. He was running against a 20-year political veteran with the backing of most of the city’s power players. His opponent had more money, but Justin had support from the people who knew his work as an alderman—and a small army of young people who believed in his change campaign. In the end, Justin lost by one of the closest margins the city had seen in years. In the district where I lived—the Yale College dorms—he won 75 percent of the vote.

The work my friends and I did for Justin wasn’t glamorous: We knocked and knocked and knocked on doors, talking to people about the issues that mattered to them and explaining why Justin was our choice. But one hidden secret of politics—one that a lot of young people don’t know—is that all you need to make real change in your community is a lot of energy and a decent pair of sneakers.

Knowing Your Place
In a country where most prominent politicians tend to be, with notable exceptions, old, white, and male, it’s easy for young people—especially young women and people of color—to look at politics today and think “there’s no place for me there.”

The truth, though, is that there is too much at stake for us not to get involved. The decisions that are being made at all levels of gov-
behavior: Most people tend to think narrowly about how issues affect themselves, their family, and their neighbors, rather than considering the broader societal and geopolitical consequences.

We’ve shown that when we make our voices heard, we can effect change. Young people have played pivotal roles in the most consequential political movements in recent history, from the anti-war movement and civil rights movement to Occupy Wall Street. In the current election cycle, thousands of young volunteers—many too young to vote—powered Bernie Sanders’ campaign from obscurity to relevance. Alex Law and Erin Schrode, both 25-year-old candidates, shook up Congressional primaries and held incumbent legislators accountable.

It’s true that young people lack the decades of wisdom enjoyed by most political volunteers, who are often either experienced party hands or active retirees. But that’s a reason to approach the work with humility, not shy away from it altogether. By the time I was 20, I’d worked on campaigns from the city council to Congress, and no one questioned why I was there. They were happy to have another organizer who believed in the cause and was willing to work.

**Acting Locally**

Tip O’Neill—the legendary Speaker of the House whose jovial love-hate relationship with President Reagan brought some balance to federal politics in the 1980s—is widely credited with inventing the adage “All politics is local.” It’s a helpful trick for understanding political behavior: Most people tend to think narrowly about how issues affect themselves, their family, and their neighbors, rather than considering the broader societal and geopolitical consequences.

It’s also a reminder that the most impactful political decisions are made not on Capitol Hill, but by mayors, city councils, and even unelected local boards and commissions. While state and federal governments provide funding, local governments exert the most control over the way resources are distributed. They are responsible for maintaining schools, homeless shelters, roads, parks, police and fire departments, libraries—the government programs and services that citizens use every day, the things we take for granted but that are essential to quality of life.

It’s no surprise that many recognizable political leaders got their start in local politics. Barack Obama worked as a community organizer on Chicago’s South Side. Bernie Sanders started his career in elected office working to revitalize the city of Burlington. Sarah Palin served on the city council of Wasilla, Alaska, before being elected mayor a few years later.

Local political institutions are more accessible, and sometimes move faster, than federal bureaucracies, making them a great place for young people to start organizing and advocating. You may not be able to testify before Congress, but anyone can testify before the city council. Knocking on a thousand doors may not make a big difference in a presidential election, but it may be what’s needed to help a school board candidate win a close race. Every day, students are playing big roles in local campaigns for youth services, environmental protection, homelessness prevention, LGBTQ rights—and they’re winning.

**Listen Up**

When I worked as a campus organizer in the fall of 2014, Connecticut Governor Dan Malloy was in danger of losing his seat in the middle of a Republican wave, and his team was counting on a lot of votes...
in our city—New Haven—to offset his losses in Connecticut’s rural areas. My job was to recruit 40 freshmen to give up their free time on weeknights and weekends to knock on doors, call likely voters, register new ones, and talk to hundreds of strangers on campus and in the city. There was just one problem: These freshmen had just arrived on campus, and most had never been to Connecticut or heard of Governor Malloy.

I needed to make them care about this election enough to give up time and energy they could have spent studying, sleeping, or hanging out. So before asking any of them to volunteer, I took them out for coffee, asked questions, and listened. I heard about the issues that drew them to politics, the injustices and inequities that kept them up at night. Every time someone shared a personal mission or cause with me, I was able to connect it to the work that Governor Malloy had done.

The best thing that young, politically active people can do is listen to the people they’re working alongside. When I was working on political campaigns in New Haven, I’d have coffee with older activists I met and listen to their stories. Joanne first started organizing to get the school system to offer better special education services for her son. Darryl was inspired to be politically active by his father, a labor union organizer. Thomas wanted the city to pay better attention to streets and park maintenance in his neighborhood. Knowing their motivations helped me as an organizer—I knew who I could ask to help me on certain projects, and how to convince them it would be worth their time—but, more important, the fact that I was willing to listen helped me earn their trust.

When I ran for city council in 2015, most of the freshmen I had recruited to work for Governor Malloy—as well as local activists like Joanne, Darryl, and Thomas—stepped up to support and knock on doors for me.

Us. Now.

When we think of young people who are politically engaged, we inevitably tend to think of the paragons and the parasites: the shining stars who boast incredible achievements we feel that we could never match, or the disagreeable demagogues itching for a fight in the comments section of your Facebook status.

But the real work, the work that makes the gears turn, is done by people who get up from behind their computer screens and attend meetings, knock on doors, and circulate petitions, listening to their neighbors and making a plan to address common concerns. It’s work that young people are fully equipped to do, especially given our energy and idealism.

As has been made startlingly clear in this past year of turbulent politics, if we fail to speak up, the people who will are the ones we might not want speaking for us. That’s why it’s important for students to be active. That doesn’t mean dedicating your life to politics or knowing everything about every issue; it just means picking an issue or candidate you deeply and truly support, and mobilizing your neighbors to do the same.

There’s a famous saying attributed to Bobby Kennedy: “If not us, who? If not now, when?” The challenges of today are too big, and too urgent, for us to hang back and depend on older generations to address. Getting things done in our communities means raising our voices.

CTY alumnus Fish Stark is an educator, organizer, and writer who is passionate about peace, equity, kids, and progressive change. Fish studies political science and education studies at Yale, where he has organized for local, state, and federal campaigns; is executive director of the Teaching Peace Initiative, a non-profit that implements peer-to-peer anti-bullying programs in public schools; and has worked for the West Virginia Department of Education. He ran for the New Haven Board of Alders in 2015.