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Juls Neel: The Activist Blueprint for Generation Z(oom)

I log into the Zoom meeting, connect to the audio and am met with the familiar smiling face in the rectangle named “Juliana Neel | she/her” that I see every week. At my first meeting for non-profit Truth in Recruitment in December where both Juliana, preferably known as Juls, and I introduced ourselves to the team, I could immediately tell the type of person she is. Juls is a consistent person; coming to every Zoom meeting with hair and makeup done, an Urban Outfitters-esque outfit, and the same lighting from her ring light. She carries herself with the maturity and professionalism of a mid-twenties woman, but at heart she is a 20 year old Gen-Z adult navigating a new remote world.



Juls is a Santa Maria native, having lived in Santa Barbara County her entire life and therefore is dedicated to giving back to this community. She wears many hats; she is an undergraduate transfer student at UC Berkeley, Project Coordinator for Truth in Recruitment, Social Media Manager at Women's March Santa Maria Valley, Executive Board Member at Santa Maria Valley Young Democrats, intern for Santa Maria City Councilwoman Gloria Soto, member of Showing Up for Racial Justice, freshly admitted member of the Grant Writing Committee at Fund for Santa Barbara, and recently appointed AD-35 Delegate.

Finding Politics

Juls' entered the social justice world when she came across a Santa Maria Pride advertisement on Facebook in 2019. As an out and proud trans woman, Juls found a space for LGBTQ+ activism through Santa Maria Pride. In this group, she realized that she was in a space where people understood her without having to say who she is, and it unlocked her interest in community engagement.

In 2015, Juls came out as trans- this was at the same time Donald Trump and his presidential campaign were gaining traction. Being a trans person means her body and her rights are always at stake, and this awareness brought out her activist side. Trump's voice and his mobilization of white supremacy made the U.S. a dangerous place for many, and as a newly out trans teenager, Juls had to grow up fast. In her conservative household, she was raised by a conservative father and grandparents, but also a liberal mother. The arguments between her father and mother

pointed out the difference between a Republican and Democrat, and shaped Juls into the politically active person she is today.

After coming out in a dangerous political environment, Juls witnessed a major win for liberals in her community. In 2018, local progressive Gloria Soto became Councilwoman of Santa Maria City. This was a big deal to Juls; she had always been surrounded by conservatives whose values and opinions did not match her own. Gloria Soto's liberal prominence and her establishment as a public servant who wants to create change became an inspiration to Juls. Her goal at this time was to become an elected official, and the first step was becoming civically engaged.

Learning Through Experience

Upon seeing the Facebook ad, Juls joined the volunteers running the Santa Maria Pride in 2019, which serves under the House of Pride and Equality (HOPE). This moment led to Juls adding more cards to her social activist deck, the first being Santa Maria Valley's Women's March. With Women's March, Juls is the social media manager, creating marketing campaigns. More recently, she helped produce the virtual March in 2020 and secured Dolores Huerta as a keynote speaker. At her first Women's March meeting, Juls immediately felt at home. She realized social justice is where she is supposed to be, and her entrance into the Santa Maria political world followed suit.

The activist journey was accelerated when she became an intern for Councilwoman Gloria Soto, her original inspiration. Everyone knows each other in the civically engaged community, and the introduction to Soto meant an introduction to many local liberals.

Another part of her civic engagement is serving as an Executive Board Member at Santa Maria Valley Young Democrats, which is an organization of registered Democrats who promote democratic causes and advocate for the most progressive policies and candidates. She was able to directly support a progressive candidate when she became a field organizer for Osvaldo Sotelo in District One in 2020. Running a campaign amidst a pandemic poses a different set of challenges. Running a ground campaign, phone banking, text banking, and door knocking became Juls' life, and she learned community organizing through this experience.



Juls while campaigning for Sotelo

Though Sotelo did not win, Juls values this experience and is grateful to have grown community organizer roots. Voting in District One was boosted, and they received an increase in two hundred votes from young people, which is her target audience since the average age in Santa

Maria is 29. Juls' interactions through these experiences built her civic engagement resume, and she attributes it to luck rather than competence. Ever the humble person, Juls says she was at the right time at the right place with Women's March and Gloria Soto, which snowballed into her multitude of experiences.

She also learned about local campaigning by conducting her own, where she ran as a candidate for AD-35 Delegate. This means being a voting member of the California Democratic Party, and doing this as a twenty-something year old is a big deal. With no regret in her voice and a grin on her face, Juls declares that she lost- but the story does not end here. U.S. Representative Salud Carbajal, as of February 2021, appointed her as a delegate. This loss turned into an opportunity, and not because of luck. This major accomplishment does not come as a surprise- her experience and accomplishments convey this.

Two other involvements are Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ) and the Fund for Santa Barbara (FFSB). With SURJ, Juls helps with graphic design as a general body member. One of Juls' priorities is to be as anti-racist as possible and advocate for Black, indigenous, trans, and people of color, which she does through SURJ. In addition, as of January 2021, Juls was nominated to be a voting member of FFSB's grant writing committee, meaning she will vote on how funds are allocated to non-profits who apply in the spring.

Juls' past and current involvements do not end here- I met her through another local organization called Truth in Recruitment. She has expanded our reach and improved productivity as Truth in Recruitment provides alternative resources to youth and their parents who do not know the reality of recruiting in the military. Juls' confidence and professionalism shines through Zoom, and I thought she was at least three years older than me and in her mid-twenties. I was wrong; Juls is younger than me and has a well-kept image that I usually attribute to people older than me. Seeing Juls in purely professional contexts prevented me from seeing the "Zoomer" or Gen-Z side of Juls, who *fearlessly* wears her Taylor Swift merch on weekends and jokes about "being a Beyoncé stan before [she] is human". When I told Juls about not realizing her age, she laughed and said that she hears this often. The age confusion comes with being trans; because she had to grow up fast, she has awareness and life experience beyond her years.

Being a Full Time Zoomer, Student, and Activist

Despite her young age, Juls is driven. She never walked during this political journey; her identity made her start off running. As a young trans woman, Juls said she knows she "has a target on [her] back," so she will always have to fight for her rights and safety. Being a public servant while also protecting her safety is a priority. Juls has been able to find spaces that empower her, and she is doing the work to protect herself and others.

To Juls, being a young activist is a Generation Z trait. Fighting for rights and amplifying marginalized voices is work that older generations are leaving for the new adults, Gen Z. This generation has the grit and determination, taking the responsibility because no one else if they do not, according to Juls. Gen Z are spearheading the work because they are the ones who are dealing with the repercussions of past generations' problems. It is not only a job for cleaning up the past, but paving the way for the future as well, and Juls shows no hesitation in doing the work.

*“When you’re 20, people think you have all of this **energy** and **rage**, but **I’m tired**.”*



Juls' AD-35 Delegate campaign picture.

A major symptom of being young and carrying the burdens of past generations (and their shortcomings) is burnout. Living through the Trump administration, becoming a target as a trans woman all while growing up has exhausted Juls. Now, a year deep into a pandemic, Juls has had to relearn community engagement while balancing school. After receiving her Associates Degree in Political Science from Allan Hancock College, Juls is now a remote student at UC Berkeley working towards a Bachelor's Degree in Political Science.

The new reliance on Zoom has caused extreme Zoom fatigue, especially for someone with a drive for action. Because of this, the frustration of planning virtual events and working remotely has taken a toll on Juls, who says that she “wants to do the work, not just talk about doing the work.” Juls' new daily life revolves around switching between Zoom classes for school and Zoom meetings for her civic work, and her screen time exceeds what most would consider normal.

However, Juls' optimism shines through, as she says the virtual world has allowed her to be in two places at the same time. No longer needing to be physically present, Juls can hop between

Zoom meetings, and she does. I have witnessed Juls' multitasking; there have been a few times that she has been in class and at a Truth in Recruitment (TIR) meeting simultaneously. She will turn off her camera, nonchalantly say that she is also in class, and somehow balance a conversation with TIR staff and listen to a lecture at the same time. Most of the time, she

dedicates her full attention to one task, but her multitasking abilities that exceed Zoom fatigue show the dedication.

The pandemic has changed Juls' outlook on life and activism, because underlying social issues in the United States that were only emphasized by COVID-19. Using the term "racial equity reckoning," Juls points out that COVID has brought racial issues to the forefront. With the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter Movement and the increase of violence against Asian Americans, to name a few pandemic events, Juls believes in the importance of looking at everything through a racial justice lens.

Looking Forward

Post-COVID, Juls' priorities and dreams have also shifted. After seeing the reality of being an elected official, her new goal is to be a chief of staff for a congressman or senator, a campaign manager, or a strategist to pull the strings for people. Ultimately, the political world is where Juls wants to stay.

Having lived in Santa Maria her entire life, Juls is proud to give back to this community. This August, Juls will be moving to Berkeley to finish her Bachelor's degree, and start a new activist journey in Northern California. Regardless, she plans on returning to Santa Maria for her post-graduation career. Her work is not done, and the community will continue to benefit from Juls and her passion for civic engagement. During this pandemic, everyone is confined in their own spaces to make change, and Juls is making productive use of hers.



Juls at the last in-person Santa Maria Women's March.