

MIKALA BUTSON: RISING FROM THE ASHES

How a young activist turned her hometown tragedy into a story of fighting for our future, energizing a new generation of activists to join her in the fight.

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Mikala Butson speaking at Sunrise protest on UCSB campus for Global Day of Action against climate change. Photo courtesy of <https://www.instagram.com/p/BvGQzAhBZA9/?igshid=r3tj9nvi5fnd>

FIRE IN PARADISE

November 8, 2018 marked a catastrophic day for the small town of Paradise, CA. A climate-fueled wildfire swept through the community and spread to more than 100,000 acres within the first two days. Later named the Camp Fire, this disastrous event claimed the lives of 85 people and destroyed 18,800 structures, making it the deadliest and most expensive wildfire in 2018.

On this November morning, Mikala Butson, a senior at the University of California, Santa Barbara, woke up extra early to study for an exam she was supposed to take that day. As she built up the courage to begin studying, she turned to social media to ease her mind. Scrolling through Facebook, she immediately became concerned about posts coming from her hometown of Paradise. Her feed was overwhelmed with confusion and speculation over a peculiar-looking sunrise, caused by smoke and flames on the horizon. A sight that many Californians know all too well. These flames quickly travelled over the mountains towards Mikala's hometown, turning these speculations into reality that disaster was about to strike.

Mikala soon received a call from her mother, who raced home from her early-morning job knowing that her son, Mikala's younger brother Nick, was still asleep with flames heading his direction. "Get the dogs, get Nick, leave," Mikala responded to her mom, after asking if she wanted her to grab any of Mikala's belongings from the house. She then lost connection. The cell towers were burning, 911 was inundated with phone calls, and no news stories were released - leaving Mikala with no answers as to if her family or hometown were okay. Nearly 500 miles away from Paradise, all Mikala could do was hope her family was safe and replay memories of her childhood home in her head.

"You never really think it's going to happen to your town," Mikala, now a Hub Coordinator for the Sunrise Movement, expressed. Natural disasters are something we often hear about, but it is impossible to imagine the pain and tragedy until you have experienced one yourself. In 2018 alone, extreme climate-related events displaced more than 17 million people globally. And, on average, kill 60,000 per year. Thankfully, Mikala's mother made it home just in time to grab her brother and dogs and drove out of town before major traffic hit. But not all of Paradise was this lucky. Mikala knew people stuck in standstill traffic on the two-lane road that runs through town. As Mikala feverishly searched online for updates on this day, she saw a video of burning bodies in cars who could not escape the flames. The gravity of the situation began to set in for Mikala.

The Camp Fire raged for 17 days total. The end of the fire did not mark the end of the story for Mikala. In fact, it was just the beginning. She felt compelled to act, expressing that "our generation is going to be the most impacted by climate change, and the older generations don't seem to care about that." Just months after the fire, Mikala thrust herself into the Sunrise Movement, which is an effective and exponentially growing youth-led movement to stop climate change and create millions of good jobs in the process.

POWER OF STORYTELLING

In 2019, the Sunrise Movement organized a Green New Deal tour in attempts to put climate policy at the forefront of our national agenda. This tour swept across the nation, selling out theatres and auditoriums in 46 states across the US. With lively audiences full of young people and others ready to fight for change, speakers of the tour invigorated audiences at the level needed to inspire a movement across America. As a young Sunrise leader with a powerful story to share, Mikala was among the speakers selected to speak at the tour's stop in Chico, a larger town just twenty minutes from Paradise.

At a sold-out stadium, Mikala bravely shared the story of losing her community to a wildfire. She recapped the tragic day of November 8th, 2018, shared special childhood memories, and called out leaders who have continuously let down our generation. "We are standing up because we have no other choice. We are fighting for our towns. We are fighting for our futures. We are fighting for our families. And we are fighting for our lives," she concluded her speech with, being met with a roaring applause and cheering from the audience.



Mikala on stage after her speech with fellow Sunrisers and 2020 Congressional candidate Audrey Denney, who was endorsed by the Sunrise Movement. Photo courtesy of Mikala Butson.

Before Mikala even had the chance to grieve the fire, she stood up on that stage and poured her heart out. She knew it had to be done at this specific moment as this was the right time, place, and energy needed for her story to move people. It is for this reason that the Sunrise Movement is so powerful. Storytelling provides an opportunity to connect with people on an emotional level, and Sunrise harnesses this technique to build up a generation of activists. “If you just tell them, California is burning - they don’t care. If you show them a person that has lost everything to a fire that is sitting there and telling you their story and showing them a picture of their house that has burned - that’s powerful,” Mikala expressed.

THE YOUTH RISING UP

Climate-fueled disasters are a threat to every community whether we believe it or not. Increasing global surface temperatures caused by burning fossil fuels raise the chances for high intensity storms, droughts, and wildfires. These events all have the potential to devastate communities, much like the Camp Fire that turned Mikala’s hometown to ashes. The climate crisis is upon us, yet our fossil-fueled economy is creating an inhabitable planet for future generations. Young people around the world are fighting for a future they have planned for, but one that is disappearing as our leaders fail to act on the reality of the crisis we are in.

March 15, 2019, marked the first global youth strike. Organizers estimate nearly 2,100 strikes in 125 countries, with 1.6 million young people participating. “We are done with the older generation and their half promises, and their lack of follow through,” Mikala stated, and this

wave of youth mobilization shows exactly that. The youth are choosing to fight back. They are choosing hope instead of fear. They are choosing to strike on a Friday afternoon, sacrificing their education and time to fight for their future plans and dreams.

The Sunrise Movement largely focuses on energizing the youth to rise up. For Mikala, her “rise up” feeling runs much deeper than the fire in Paradise that led her to the Sunrise Movement. She describes that she has always had an inclination towards activism. As a child, Mikala would protest at circuses to fight for the rights of circus animals. Years later during the time of Proposition 8, she found herself going door to door to ask voters for their support of same-sex marriage. It was not until a class she took her first quarter at UCSB called “What’s wrong with the world? How do we fix it?” that caused her to take a deeper look at issues plaguing our society. Taught by Professor John Foran, this class is where Mikala first learned that we are focusing on the wrong problems. How the solution to saving our planet is not recycling but holding fossil fuel companies responsible for emissions. Mikala felt very defeated. How could she individually transform our society and economy towards a sustainable and equitable future? Despite this defeat, Mikala noted “something was sparked.” Just months later, the fire hit.

Mikala took another class with Professor John Foran her first quarter back at UCSB after the fire. She informed him about the fire and the widespread devastation in her community, and he connected her to the Sunrise Movement. From there, her involvement propelled forward from giving a speech at Sunrise’s Green New Deal tour, to writing an essay titled “Paradise—may it be all its name implies” to be published in the book *Winning the Green New Deal: Why We Must, How We Can* written by a co-founder of the Sunrise Movement. This early involvement included months of learning how to write a speech, entailing a two-day workshop in Philadelphia and a seven-week online course, and editing her essay over the course of a year to cut 10,000 words down to just 500.

While being fueled by the momentum of the movement, Mikala’s emotions towards the fire were suppressed. This momentum, coupled with staying strong for her mom and brother, caused her to not emotionally process it herself. This past November was the two-year anniversary of the fire. As this date approached, her emotions all came flooding in. Six months into the pandemic, Mikala broke down after hearing the song “The House That Built Me,” by Miranda Lambert. She cried for the first time over the fire and began to grieve the loss of her childhood home and community. Mikala’s ability to share her story without having grieved the fire herself first shows her true activist roots. Prioritizing the cause over herself to rally an audience to push for change is what defines Mikala’s activism.

ON THE SUNRISE AGENDA

Now as a Hub Coordinator for the Sunrise Movement, Mikala says she is “at the point where I like helping other people learn how to tell their stories,” now that she has processed her own emotions towards the fire. Sunrise’s current agenda largely involves recruiting new members to build up their team, then conducting training to align members on their vision and plan to win the Green New Deal. Part of this plan includes training on public narratives and how to use your

story to shift public opinion, just as Mikala fearlessly shared her story to move a sold-out auditorium. This training cycle ensures a new generation of activists to continue the fight, no matter how young. Even kids as young as 10 years old have been involved in the movement, Mikala shared.

Recruiting and training members are not the only items on Sunrise’s agenda. Voter outreach and promoting Democratic candidates is another way Sunrise ensures climate change is made a national priority. Including efforts in the Presidential and Congressional primaries, Sunrise’s total voter outreach for the 2020 cycle surpassed 8 million voters. This presidential election marked the highest youth voter turnout in [history](#), with climate change being largely responsible for this accomplishment. Informing young voters about Biden’s climate plan was the leading factor in increasing voter enthusiasm, [Change Research](#) shows. The message here is clear: young people are showing up because their future is at stake. “The youth are the climate movement,” Mikala described. Whether it be through voting for political leaders with pro-environmental attitudes, showing up energized to climate strikes, or simply envisioning a brighter future, the youth are rising up in any way they can.



Sunrisers leading a climate strike. Photo courtesy of https://fpif.org/as-the-decade-closes-the-power-of-protest-endures/shutterstock_1511522726/

The Sunrise Movement acts as a platform for youth to find a shared purpose. It provides an outlet to collectively direct their passions in ways that make a tangible difference. For Mikala, the Sunrise Movement transformed her defeated outlook of the world into a hopeful vision for the future. She channeled her pain and deeply rooted passion for justice into an avenue that

allowed her to share her story with thousands to inspire others to rise up. Mikala admitted that at times she can feel burnt out and overwhelmed by never-ending climate crises, such as the climate-fueled Texas storm that left millions without food, water, and access to power. However, Mikala noted, “every time I watch a video that Sunrise posts, I feel moved to do something...it reinvigorates you.” Sunrise is able to provide hope to today’s youth at times of despair by connecting them to a movement larger than themselves, which is a necessary step in preparing the generation who will be most impacted by climate change.

Today, the town of Paradise remains in shambles. The lively community Mikala once knew she now describes as a haunted feeling when she returns. Places where Mikala spent much of her childhood, such as the ballet studio where she took her first dance class, are now decimated structures filled with debris and ash. Without having the money to rebuild, thousands of community-members remain displaced. Those who lost their homes to the fire await money from a PG&E lawsuit, the utility company whose transmission line ignited the fire. With one unprecedented fire season after another, thousands of more Californians will face displacement in the future. Paradise serves as an example that we lack adequate resources to handle the overwhelming amount of climate-related displacements that are bound to occur if we do not drastically transform our society to mitigate the impacts of climate change.

In the face of this climate crisis and the life altering events of 2020, Mikala’s perseverance is inspiring. Her ability to have a smile across her face despite the tragedy she experienced is a true defining characteristic of her activism. Carrying this smile and enthusiasm for enacting just policies through her activism, Mikala has proved to be an invaluable leader in the Sunrise Movement. With a Green New Deal tour speech and publication already under her belt, her future shines bright as she is also backed by an army of politically energized young people willing to fight alongside her. There is no doubt that Sunrise will continue to have far-reaching impacts as activists like Mikala join forces to push for large-scale policy changes like the Green New Deal that will transform American society.

It’s never too late to rise up.

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