EARTH HEROES

GRETA THUNBERG



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THE SCHOOLGIRL WHO SPARKED A REVOLUTION

The forest was burning. Enormous orange flames curled around tree trunks and climbed into the canopy. The heat was intense and smoke filled the air. A hundred volunteer fire fighters – students, teachers and holiday-makers – had come from Jokkmokk, the nearest town, to help. As Greta watched the drama unfold on her television screen, they pointed hosepipes at blazing trees and blackened stumps. Above the crackle of flames and thud of falling branches, she could hear the thrum of a helicopter overhead, as its pilot desperately dropped water bombs to douse the flames.

It was July 2018. It had been a freakishly hot summer in Sweden, with a drought and the highest temperatures recorded in over 260 years. Wildfires had raged uncontrollably through the country's forests. Jokkmokk is famous for its winter market, but even this area of Lapland at the Arctic Circle had not escaped the fires, the largest of which tore through an area the size of 900 football pitches. In Greta's home city, Stockholm, it had been the hottest summer since records began, with many days exceeding 30 degrees Celsius.

A month later, Greta sat at her kitchen table making preparations. She thought about the key facts people should know about global warming and, choosing her words carefully, neatly wrote out a stack of flyers. Then on a board she painted the words 'School Strike for Climate'. Her parents tried to dissuade her, but the next morning, instead of heading off to school, she stuffed the flyers and some schoolbooks into her rucksack, jumped on to her bike and pedalled to the Swedish parliament building. She sat down outside, propping her sign up against the wall. People hurried by on their way to work, clutching briefcases and sipping from coffee cups. But if they noticed the slight girl with long brown pigtails, they didn't stop to find out more.

Greta was skipping school to protest about climate change. All summer, she had followed news of Sweden's wildfires and the heatwave that had killed hundreds of people across Europe. In 2015, Sweden had been one of 197 countries that signed the Paris Climate Agreement; each country had agreed to reduce their greenhouse emissions so that the rise in global temperature could be limited to less than two degrees Celsius, but little had changed since that time. Without action, children like her would grow up in a world dangerously affected by climate change, and yet nobody seemed to be doing anything about it. She had no choice but to act. Greta would strike from school until Parliament made the urgent changes to laws needed to meet the Paris targets.

This moment of protest didn't appear from nowhere. Greta had been building up to it for the last seven years. She lives in Sweden's capital city, along with her younger sister. Her mother is an opera singer and her father, an actor, stays at home to look after his daughters. Growing up, Greta learned piano and ballet, and loved being outdoors – horse riding and walking the family's dogs. Before her climate strike, she had just been a normal schoolgirl, if a little quiet and shy – the girl at the back of the class who was afraid to speak up.

Greta was eight when she first learned about climate change. Her teacher had shown her class a film about melting Arctic ice, starving polar bears and plastic in the oceans. As she watched, Greta cried. And when her classmates went back to their games, she could not forget what she had seen.

Greta started to read everything she could about the problem. She discovered that global warming is causing droughts, floods, extreme heatwaves and forcing people to leave their homes. Human actions are also destroying wildlife and their habitats. She was shocked that the world has known about climate change for 30 years, but instead of treating it as an emergency, adults didn't seem to be taking it seriously. TV programmes and newspapers weren't talking about it, and little had been done to try and stop it. What kind of world would she live in when she grew up?

Aged 11, feeling hopeless about the planet's future, Greta became depressed. She stopped going to school, she stopped eating and lost 10 kilograms in weight. She also stopped speaking to anyone apart from her family. Greta was off school for a year while her parents took care of her. During that time, she learned that she had Asperger syndrome, which means she

has a different way of seeing the world compared to most other people.

While at home, she eventually told her parents about her worries about the environment. Sharing her fears made her feel a little better. After that, Greta would not stop talking to her parents about the climate crisis and showed them books, articles, films and reports she had found. Her parents grew to realise that they'd never really taken the issue seriously before. By then, Greta had already become a vegan, and had stopped shopping for new things. Soon her father became a vegetarian and her whole family stopped travelling by plane. They started to cycle to get around and replaced their car with an electric one. Seeing her family change made Greta realise that she could make a difference. It helped to lift her out of her depression, and she decided to devote her life to fighting climate change.

Greta returned to school, where she joined a climate action group. Inspired by school strikes in America to protest against guns, someone suggested they could have a school strike too. Greta loved this idea but no one wanted to join her, so she left the group and decided to strike alone.

On the first day of her protest, Greta sat outside the parliament building from 8.30 a.m. to 3 p.m. –

the whole school day. She posted pictures on social media and from the second day people started to join her. Newspapers were soon reporting her story. Passing politicians told her she was wasting lesson time, but she told them adults had wasted 30 years by not acting against global warming. Others said she should go back to school and study science so she could find a solution to climate change, but she told them that it had already been found: greenhouse gas emissions had to stop. All that was needed was for people to wake up and change.

Greta skipped school for three weeks, up until Sweden's elections in September. After that she decided to continue her strike every Friday, even through the harsh Swedish winter. In ice and snow, wrapped in a yellow raincoat, ski trousers and a woolly hat, she sat outside Parliament. People had ignored her when she first started her protest, but now adults, as well as students, travelled to join her. Greta's story spread around the world and soon students in other countries were inspired to hold their own 'Fridays for the Future' school strikes too.

In autumn 2018, Greta stood for the first time in front of thousands of people. It was a climate change rally outside the European Parliament. Her parents had

worried about their shy daughter taking the stage, but Greta insisted on going. That day, she gave a perfect speech in English, her second language. Her father was so proud that he cried.

Since then, Greta has spoken all over Europe. Her parents drove her to London so she could address thousands at an Extinction Rebellion protest. She has given a TED talk that has been watched by millions on YouTube. And, unlike the leaders of the countries she has visited, Greta matches her words with actions. She took a 32-hour train journey to talk to world leaders in Davos, Switzerland, while others arrived by private jet. And to give a speech in New York, she travelled by racing yacht because it was the most environmentally friendly way to cross the ocean.

In her speeches, Greta has warned the world's leaders that they're stealing their own children's futures through inaction. She doesn't want them to offer people hope. In fact, she doesn't want them to feel hopeful at all. She wants them to feel the same panic and fear she feels each day when thinking about the climate crisis. And then she wants them to act.

Juggling schoolwork with saving the planet takes a lot of time and energy. Greta gets up at 6 a.m. to get ready for school. Homework, interviews and writing speeches

can mean working 15-hour days. However, she always catches up on missed lessons and is still near the top of her class. The importance of what she's doing gives her the strength to keep going. And she believes that, rather than being something she would want to change, her Asperger syndrome has actually helped her activism. It has allowed her to see problems clearly, and meant she was happy to begin her strike alone.

If not stopped, climate change will affect people all over the world, and could lead to wars, as drought and crop failure force people to leave their homelands in the search for food. To recognise her work, Greta has been nominated for the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize, the youngest person ever to be nominated for this very important award.

In March 2019, seven months after Greta first sat down in front of Sweden's parliament, she was there again, but this time alongside 20,000 students marching and chanting slogans. That same day, 1.6 million students in 125 countries, from Australia and Uganda to Japan and America, left their desks to take part in over 200 peaceful marches in the Youth Global Climate Strike for the Future. Greta's lone protest has grown into a global movement.

Greta will strike outside Parliament every Friday

until Sweden acts on the promises it made in the Paris Agreement. And only when our leaders wake up and listen to the scientists will she and other young people gladly return to school. In the meantime, she says that if children can make headlines all over the world by skipping school one day a week, imagine what we could all achieve together if we tried. But if there is one thing that Greta's incredible story proves, it's that we each have the power to demand change – and that we are never too small to make a difference.