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Climate Changer

This 12-year-old is taking the U.S. Government to court over the effects of climate change.

By JOHANNA LENANDER

Levi Draheim's love of the environment started pretty much the day he was born. When he cried as a baby, his mother, Leigh-Ann, would take him outside. "The best way to help him feel better was to put him in water or dirt," she says.

Today this homeschooled 12-year-old from Satellite Beach, Florida, is the youngest plaintiff in *Juliana v. United States*, a constitutional climate lawsuit filed in 2015 by a group of 21 teens and children from across the U.S. Their complaint asserts that through actions that cause climate change, the government has violated the youngest generation's constitutional rights to life, liberty, and property, and that it has also failed to protect essential public trust resources.

In spite of both the Obama and Trump administrations' best efforts to have the case quashed, the lawsuit has kept chugging on through several rounds in the District of Oregon (where it was originally filed), the Ninth District

Court of Appeals, and even the Supreme Court. Currently, the *Juliana* plaintiffs and their lawyers are waiting for a date to go to trial, but in the meantime, they have sought a court order preventing the government from issuing leases and mining permits for extracting coal on public lands, leases for offshore oil and gas exploration, and federal approvals for new fossil fuel infrastructure.

With his perky prepubescent voice, confident demeanor, and what he himself describes as a "crazy Afro," Draheim has become a charismatic spokesperson for a generation who can't afford to sit back and watch their world be destroyed. He lives on a barrier island that is only 3ft above water, so he's seen the impact of climate change up close.

"I know that my barrier island is going to go underwater if climate change continues at the current rate," Draheim says. "It makes me upset at previous generations and also really



sad.” He has learned to channel those feelings into direct action. Besides being part of the Juliana lawsuit, Draheim has participated in planting initiatives to restore and protect the dunes of his island’s beaches, which have been eroded by recent hurricanes. “Field planting is so good because the grass and shrubs hold the dunes together when there is a hurricane or really high winds,” he explains. He also finds the planting gratifying on a personal level: “After a couple of years or so, you can really see the work you’ve done. And then you can tell all your friends, ‘I planted sea oats here,’ and it’s really cool.”

His mother and he have also helped organize other local homeschooled kids who have adopted a beach that they clean up regularly. “We pick up any trash we see on the beach and weigh it, which is fun, because then you can see how much you have collected. I like to compare my results with my friends’ to see who has picked up the most,” he says.

Draheim is just as cheerful and easygoing about the more high-profile work, such as press conferences and speaking at marches and rallies. “I’m a really outgoing type of kid,” he says. “I generally don’t have a problem with giving speeches.” Except maybe for his debut, which was the kind of experience that adults tend to have anxiety dreams about. “My first speech was at the Brevard County Democrats meeting, and I was really nervous,” he recalls. “I dropped my note cards, and when I picked them up, they were all out of order. After I found the first one, I was able to continue with the speech just fine, but I was pretty scared.”

Being a public figure has mostly been a positive experience, with widespread support from the local community and beyond. Draheim has also experienced the ugly side of political activism: “After I gave one of my speeches, this guy came up to me and said, ‘You know, you’re really brave to be doing this and taking part in this lawsuit.’ I said, ‘Thank you,’ and then he said, ‘Because you’re wrong.’ And then he walked off. I thought it was weird that his whole goal was to go up to a kid and just be really sarcastic. I just kept doing what I was doing.”

If you’re wondering what speechwriting looks like for an 12-year-old, here’s a breakdown courtesy of his mother: “First we get as much info as we can about the event and the audience. That makes a difference. Then we go through updates on the case. From there, I make a list of talking points and Draheim uses those to make an outline. I type up his speech as he dictates it, then I read it back to him. He practices the full speech first, then tries it without any notes. Anything that he forgets we write down as bullet points. By the time he gives the actual speech, all he needs is a list of keywords to keep him in the right order.”

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Draheim performs his role as a high-profile sustainability advocate in close collaboration with his mother. And while Draheim’s can-do attitude seems unwaveringly cheerful, his mother’s activism is rooted in deep anxiety for her child’s future. “I feel an impatient helplessness, especially every time we get pushed back a little bit more by the government trying to delay the case,” she says. “The kids are often told that they are ‘our last hope’ or that they make someone feel hopeful. We don’t want people to feel hopeful—we want them to understand that this is an emergency.”

Even though the legal twists and turns over the past three years have been discouraging, his mother can take comfort from the fact that the Juliana plaintiffs have inspired other grassroots actions. “I know our case has sparked cases around the world, as well as encouraged youth in general to speak up,” she says.

While Draheim doesn’t necessarily seem to think of himself as a role model, he lights up when hearing about the influence of the case. “It’s really cool to know that we have inspired other young people to take action for what they think is right,” he says.

What’s his advice to any other young person who wants to make an impact but doesn’t know where to start? “Find organizations that are working for the things that you’re passionate about, then ask what the best ways are for you to help.”

