

Honoring Environmental Heroes in 2025

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Ariana Brocious: I'm Ariana Brocious

Kousha Navidar: I'm Kousha Navidar.

Ariana Brocious: And this is Climate One.

[music change]

Kousha Navidar: What compels ordinary people to take extraordinary actions in defense of clean air and water? Every year, the Goldman Environmental Prize recognizes individuals from around the world for their efforts to protect and enhance our natural environment.

Ariana Brocious: The prize has been around nearly three decades, and in that time has honored more than 200 environmental champions from nearly 100 different countries.

Kousha Navidar: The prize founders, philanthropists Richard and Rhoda Goldman, wanted to draw attention to the global need for environmental action by highlighting the work of ordinary individuals.

Ariana Brocious: And these folks are really remarkable. Many of them do this work at great personal risk. As we're seeing federal rollbacks of climate and environment protections and funding, and the closure of environmental justice offices around the country, this work is more important than ever.

Kousha Navidar: And people who do this work are often underrecognized, so it's really meaningful to give them the spotlight.

Ariana Brocious: I had the opportunity to talk with one of last year's prize winners, Andrea

Vidaurre. She worked to persuade California to adopt two historic transportation regulations that significantly limit trucking and rail emissions. And this really matters in the place she lives: a region east of Los Angeles, connected by highway to major ports like LA and Long Beach, known as the Inland Empire.

Andrea Vidaurre: The Inland Empire is a beautiful region. Ancestral Tongva Serrano, Kaia land, and it's a valley, which I think is really important, surrounded by mountains, and a lot of hills. That topography is also why we end up having so much air pollution in the region because it gets trapped there. And you know, on top of the fact that we have like three or four major highways, half a million diesel trucks that are driving in and out every single day. and two major railways. But yeah, this community is highly immigrant. It's one of the largest populations of immigrant Latino people in the US. Also one of the fastest growing regions in the state. We've seen a lot of people moving east from larger cities, because of housing and because of the economy, et cetera. So we're also dealing with a huge influx of people coming in. And so how do we adjust to that? I think has been really important, not just on jobs, but like all of the things that one might need in a community.

Ariana Brocious: In some cases, there's sort of been a loss of housing in favor of more warehouse space. Right?

Andrea Vidaurre: Yeah. We've seen housing losses in the inland empire as well, through some of these major warehouse projects that have come in that either encroach onto a neighborhood or literally buy up and displace entire neighborhoods. This practice has been going on actually for decades. There's some historically Black communities in San Bernardino that this happened to where, their neighborhood started slowly being industrialized, their zoning, and then you saw just mass displacement of people. And we're seeing that now in communities like Bloomington and Mead Valley, where it's kind of this like rural and incorporated communities where warehouse developers are coming in, buying people off or pressuring people to leave and then, I mean, even to the point where they're buying elementary schools, and parks, and putting in a warehouse project there, because it makes, I guess, quote unquote more economic sense to have a warehouse than people.

Ariana Brocious: Well, let's talk for a minute about where this desire for warehouse space is coming from. I mean, I think it's probably obvious to listeners, but you know, there's been an enormous expansion in online shopping for years, much of that driven by Amazon, and that requires storage of a lot of these packages after they've been imported, while they're waiting to be shipped to some customer, and they also need a way to get there. Hence all of these highways and the ports where the things are delivered. And so. Amazon's largest single warehouse is in the Inland Empire, and about 40% of the nation's consumer goods flow through this region. That's millions of shipments every day. And I just wanna stop and appreciate how much of our commerce is probably wrapped up into that. So, so we can think of that in, in economic figures, but as a resident, how have you seen your home change as this development has happened?

Andrea Vidaurre: Yeah, I mean, this has been long planned, right? I, I will say like, yes, there's a piece that is consumer led for sure, but there's also a piece that's kind of been forced upon us, right? There was tax dollars that went into increasing the capacity of the ports of LA and Long Beach. Almost all the warehousing is built to spec. So build it and they will come. On top of the fact that we have algorithms feeding us ways that we can get things faster and faster, right? So there is this whole environment that is pushing the consumer to act and normalize this, normalize a system of delivery that we didn't have even five years ago. But there's no way to do all these things to get next day delivery, to have your shelves stocked at your stores without physical infrastructure, right? It just doesn't come out of thin air. And so you need airports to expand freight cargo. You need rail lines to expand their capacity. You need warehouses, right? And so what we saw, because this area has been kind of designated as the zone that will do it for so much of the rest of the country, is literal

neighborhoods like the one I grew up in are seeing warehouses just pop up literally right next door. I mean, to some point it's across the street. It's 60 feet behind some people's homes. It's neighboring the tennis courts at the high school. Right? You could throw a pebble and hit the wall, right? It's getting super close, and that's what you see as the change. The other change is these warehouses attract dozens of trucks, diesel trucks. I'm talking the big rigs, right? 18 wheelers. So you see traffic has gone up incredibly and because it's so close to residential communities, I mean, picking up your kid from school has changed so much, right? What used to be 15, 20 minutes could be like 40, 45 minutes, right? I mean, even in some of these neighborhoods, to the point where the fire department has had to tell the county that if there's an emergency, we won't be able to get any fire trucks out there because of how bad the traffic is. So yeah, that's kind of the change you've seen on top of the air quality change. Of course.

Ariana Brocious: Yeah, let's talk about the air quality because some people have described this region as a "diesel death zone" because of what you're talking about. There are major health impacts from all of that air pollution. Could you share any stories with people that are close to you, that you've seen experienced some of these, these impacts?

Andrea Vidaurre: Yeah, I mean Diesel Death Zones came out of like communities calling it this, and I think medical professionals validating it. Because yeah, there's concentrations of diesel pollution in some of these neighborhoods, and yeah, people do have incredible health impacts from it. I mean, certain census tracts in our neighborhood has a 12 year-less life expectancy than the state of California, right? These neighborhoods where there's elementary schools, where there's high schools, right? 12 years. I mean, we're talking 68 is like the average life expectancy of some of these neighborhoods. And we hear it all the time, right? I mean, there's, people have had to have double lung transplants and they've never smoked a day in their life. You know, taking allergy medicines from a really young age, pregnant people having their babies come out too early because of some type of effect in the womb. Air pollution affects people in all sorts of ways. I know some of the folks that we work with closely, have had to run track with an inhaler in their hand just to make it, just to make it through the run. These are issues you hear about every day. A little, anecdotally, but then, you know, we also have public health science that backs it up.

Ariana Brocious: Yeah. Can I ask, how's your health, has your health been affected by this?

Andrea Vidaurre: No, thankfully not. And I think that's why we do it. I mean, sometimes you don't know when it's gonna affect you, though. That's the thing about air quality, right? Air quality and air pollution is a silent killer. You know, it's a silent violence that you don't know sometimes until it's too late and I don't want it to be too late for me or my families. A lot of people that get involved in this work sometimes have lost family members too soon or are dealing with their kids that might have those issues. I don't have any issues as of right now, but that's not something I'm gonna wait for to happen. Right.

Ariana Brocious: Right. Well, I'm happy to hear that. Let's pivot now to talk about the work you've been doing to address these issues. So I wanna give listeners kind of a snapshot of your work to reform California's emissions and air quality standards. So in 2018, you were a community organizer. There were already decades worth of complaints from residents about these emissions and the health impacts. And that year, the California Air Resources Board announced they were gonna initiate a rulemaking process for truck and rail emissions. They wanted to come see what it's like on the ground. So you took some of these board members on quote unquote toxic tours, to see the impacts of this freight industry in your home. So tell us about what those tours were like and what they thought of them.

Andrea Vidaurre: Yeah, this is a tactic that I've learned from other environmental justice

communities across the state. Basically, when you're going up to Sacramento or to places of power, you get three minutes if you're lucky to make your case about what's going on. And so this idea was actually, let's bring the decision makers down to us. Let's have some time to actually sit and listen and smell and hear, and like basically live a day in the life of somebody that's directly impacted. Right? And this is, you know, very much led by residents themselves who invite community members into their backyard, into the front of their house, into their porch, right? So yeah, we would bring people down to sit by the rail yard and have to scream because the train's going by so loud, right next to you. Or we'd be standing by the airport, when flights are coming in to the Amazon Air in San Bernardino, or we'd be in Bloomington, where we would see where some of these places were being targeted for warehousing. Some people get emotional and teary-eyed. It brings up a lot of stuff when you get to see it. I think what it also does is it helps show a perspective that maybe lobbyists don't ever get to bring into the room, because as you know, a lot of paid lobbyists in the trucking logistics industry, I mean, they pay for people to be talking to decision makers every day. but sometimes it really is as simple as bringing someone close to the yard and being like, oh, they say they can't electrify and charge because there's no place to charge. What about that? Right? And they can physically see it with their own eyes. So that was really important for us to do.

Ariana Brocious: Yeah. And so partly I would imagine as a result of some of those tours, the California Air Resources Board determined they needed to strengthen emissions rules. And in 2020 they enacted the advanced clean trucks rule. So this established a timeline encouraging manufacturers to sell zero emission trucks in California, and a plan to accelerate the adoption of zero emission trucks by shipping companies. 2020 is also the year that you and your co-founders formally launched the People's Collective for Environmental Justice. So what spurred that? What spurred your decision to launch that organization?

Andrea Vidaurre: Yeah, I mean, 2020 was so crazy for everybody, right? I Being stuck at home, realizing, you know, people saying, oh, the air quality's gonna get better 'cause no one's driving. And then realizing actually the trucks are still moving. And actually the workers sacrifice their bodies every day going into these facilities not knowing what's gonna happen to their health. 'cause we didn't know yet what Covid was or what it would do, what it could do, right? These essential workers were on the line. It was kind of the environment we grew up in along with, the assassination of , George Floyd, just this like reckoning of like, environmental racism is a part of this problem too. So let's create an organization that can really take those that are impacted in the IE. And influence state law. And so, yeah, a lot of us had been working in the region already doing environmental justice work. And we took like the relationships, we had what we knew built this collective, a horizontally-led organization that is made up of people that live in the IE. Work in the IE and wanna see it better.

Ariana Brocious: IE is the Inland Empire.

Andrea Vidaurre: Yes. And one of the first things we worked on was, was this, at CARB, doing truck counts in our communities, creating comms around the issues, organizing meetings, and then trying to get people up to Sacramento as much as possible, to be able to weigh in on the rule.

Ariana Brocious: Yeah. Okay. So really getting involved directly. So let's jump ahead to 2023. California's Air Resources Board Carb enacts a new policy. This is a compliment to the one we talked about that was passed in 2020. This one is called the Advanced Clean Fleet Regulation, which requires shipping companies to introduce zero emission vehicles into their fleets. And by 2035, some of those vehicles could only be zero emission. So you were in the room when this decision was made. What did that moment feel like?

Andrea Vidaurre: That moment was super special. I mean, it wasn't just me, it was like a bunch of

residents from the Inland Empire that were with us. And it, it was a celebration, right? I mean, it was emotional. People had spent hours here, giving testimony. People had flown up many miles. I think it was a sigh of relief. Right. Like, like great, like, you know, this is done. It's bittersweet of course, 'cause we know things don't change the next day, but a lot of people are doing this for their kids, for their grandkids, right. Knowing this is a change that'll happen in a decade or two, but I mean, it's huge, right? I was super happy. Something that we like to do before we go into these meetings is we kind of ground ourselves and ask each other like, who are you bringing in the room with you? And a lot of people bring into the room people that aren't there anymore. And so I think that was another really special piece was like, we by no means started this. People decades before us have been working on this issue. Some of them aren't here anymore. So it was also, I think, really special to think about how far we've come.

Ariana Brocious: So now there's been a big shift in California's goals towards zero emissions. Specifically this rule, the advanced clean fleets rule. So let's jump back real quick. In 2023, California applied for a waiver from the federal government enabling the state to put in these more progressive air quality regulations. Basically it was assumed that the EPA would give them the waiver, and that this rule would go through. But in January after the recent presidential election, California withdrew its request for that waiver. Why was that?

Andrea Vidaurre: I think two reasons. I think one of them was that CARB was afraid that if the Trump administration was gonna take that and, and not pass the approval, right? And so I think CARB pulled it back so that they could maybe spend some more time figuring out how they can get it approved so that it could be, you know, legally enforceable. I think the other part, they took it down because the Democratic administration before, the Biden administration's EPA wasn't going to approve it in time, which I think is really important too. It sat on their desk for a long time and it was a very controversial rule. But it was also like a, like a life saving regulation as well. And I think it also got incredibly controversial once it got to DC, which I don't think is okay because the state of California approved it. Right. And it's kind of like, let California do what it's gonna do. So yeah, that's where we're at.

Ariana Brocious: They sort of. They sort of pulled it preemptively. So the Trump administration did not rule on it. Right. Or, yeah. , And so that puts a lot of these regulations. It sort of casts all these regulations into kind of uncertain territory, right?

Andrea Vidaurre: Yeah, for sure. I mean, I think what we know right now is that only parts of the regulation can be enforced. Mostly stuff that has to do with state fleets. Also, for a rule such as the advanced lead truck rule, there's also, you know, efforts to try to attack that as well.

Ariana Brocious: Yeah. There's been a very, substantial effort by the Trump administration to roll back a lot of environmental regulations across the board at the federal level. So you know, you're a grassroots organizer, and progress can often be non-linear. And also it's hard, it's hard work. So how are you and the people you work with responding to this? How do you feel about kind of what you've learned in the last few years working on this issue?

Andrea Vidaurre: Yeah, I mean, I think we all had our moment of like, okay, we're gonna be sad and we're gonna be disappointed. But then we're gonna wake up and we're gonna keep doing what we do. We don't have a choice, right? We don't have a choice but to stay optimistic that we are working towards something bigger than all of us. We're taking this time to sit back and strategize how to come up, come out stronger. to defend as much as we can to get more people involved. So that next time around, right, we have even bigger advancements than we had right now. and I also think just building locally, right, there are things we can do regionally, statewide, to lower our emissions. We are working on a ports indirect source rule, which is a regulation to regulate the ports

from our air district. Nothing is stopping us from doing that. There are funds that can still be used to incentivize trucker turnover. We need to see the full use of those funds be used, right? Because this, you know, momentum to zero emissions is moving, you know, no matter what. Right? The rest of the world is moving off of fossil fuels. They're transitioning their transportation sector. Just because, you know, there's tantrums, federally, doesn't mean that the rest of the world's gonna stop. Right. And at the, the market hasn't been stimulated enough to, to move on its own. And so I have faith that we're still gonna be able to see some advances. I think the one part that's hard is that, you know, transportation is one of the leading greenhouse gas emitters, right? For climate change. And so outside of local air pollution, we're also talking about climate change here. And so that's, I think the one thing that gets really hard is to think about we need to be doing this stuff sooner and faster. So how these, this kind of stunts that a little bit, but I still think the momentum's there.

Ariana Brocious: Pre-pandemic online shopping was a huge thing. And then wow, it just became, you know, the thing during the pandemic, it felt safest. You know, even though there were many frontline workers who definitely were being put in dangerous situations. And I think that trend probably has only continued. It's just sort of a normal part of life for people of any of, of like varying social classes. And so. Do you think that like a, an average American needs to stop and consider the impact of all the packages they have shipped to their door and maybe, as you say, try to, I don't know, to keep some of that more local? Would that have any impact on the pollution in the Inland Empire?

Andrea Vidaurre: Yeah. No, I think, I do think people, we do need a cultural shift right? Around consumption, just in general, right? Like the, just even outside of the transportation part of it, just the huge plastic use that's out there is detrimental to so many communities here and abroad who deal with plastic pollution. So I do think we need to find ways to even try to figure out how our food gets more localized, right? How we're eating within season. Like, yes, I think all of that paradigm shift would help the impacts. But there is also like this algorithm feeding us, forcing us to think about how we need all this stuff all the time. And I think that's a bit, we do need a challenge. Do I think it's gonna stop the impacts completely? No. But I think it is an important way to start, you know, lessening the demand.

Ariana Brocious: What keeps you in the fight?

Andrea Vidaurre: Hmm. Being in community, building community with one another I think keeps me in the fight. I think all of us knowing we have a bigger purpose to kind of fight for things that we do want. As much as this fight has been around, like, we don't want diesel air pollution. We don't want these negative health impacts. It's also that we want more spaces for young people and we want more green space and we want more jobs that are fitting with like the future, like environments that we need, right? Like I think fighting for a lot of these things helps me stay in the fight as much as it is to fight against it.

Ariana Brocious: Yeah. Andrea Vidaurre is co-founder of the People's Collective for Environmental Justice. Andrea, thank you so much for talking with us on Climate One.

Andrea Vidaurre: Yeah. Thank you so much.

Kousha Navidar: Today we're highlighting the work of grassroots environmental defenders who have been awarded the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize.

Coming up, we talk with a woman from New Hampshire who took on a factory that was leaking toxic PFAS into her town's drinking water:

Laurene Allen: They do not break down. They bioaccumulate in the environment, they will be there for 50 lifetimes at least.

Kousha Navidar: That's up next, when Climate One continues.

Ariana Brocious: Help others find our show by leaving us a review or rating. Thanks for your support!

Kousha Navidar: This is Climate One. I'm Kousha Navidar. This year, we hosted some of the 2025 Goldman Environmental Prize winners for a conversation on the Climate One stage during San Francisco Climate Week.

In New Hampshire, the Saint-Gobain Performance Plastics factory leaked toxic forever chemicals into the local drinking water for decades. Greg Dalton spoke with Laurene Allen, a clinical social worker who stepped up to protect thousands of affected families and organize a campaign that led to the plant's closure. She says an early inspiration goes back to when she was 12, and she found a copy of Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring" at a yard sale.

Laurene Allen: I picked that book up for a nickel or so and read it, and it really pulled me in. And as I walked the woods and looked at the streams, I started thinking about what she wrote and how immense this all was.

Greg Dalton: Let's talk about Merrimack, New Hampshire. There's a river that runs through it called the Merrimack River where people get their water and right on the river was a big processing plant called St. Gobain Performance Plastics. What was happening there? Set the scene.

Laurene Allen: Well, they acquired from a company called ChemFab, and their claim to fame was this. fiberglass infused fabric that was very light. So it's Teflon coated. So they patented this process where you could take fabric, dip it into pans, saturated with PFAS forever chemicals, run it up these towers, cook it and emit through 13 unfiltered air stacks. So the air particulate goes for miles and miles and miles into the soil, leeches into groundwater, into waterways, and all of it was bad news to the environment and the humans.

Greg Dalton: PFAS stands for a word that I cannot pronounce. Maybe you can. The mouthful, they're also known as Toxic Forever Chemicals. So what are they and why are they so bad?

Laurene Allen: One of the names is perfluorinated alkaline substances and they are Teflon basically. So the water in, in oil repellent qualities really create this bond that's very, very hard to break with carbon and fluorine and, um, they do not break down. They bioaccumulate in the environment, they will be there for 50 lifetimes at least.

Greg Dalton: Our goretex jacket's gonna be -

Laurene Allen: bad news. Yeah. So we can do without that, you know, and, and in your bodies. So when these chemicals get into your bodies and they're in everyone's bodies at this point, you don't excrete them and they don't break down. So they wreak havoc. They are the most persistent of endocrine disruptors. So the endocrine system is be all to all of our health systems.

Greg Dalton: So in New Hampshire, people have a habit of being pretty stoic, pretty, you know, unique state, uh, saying we're fine. So what were, what were you seeing and hearing at

Laurene Allen: Well, the first information meeting in early 2016, uh, it was really a relay of a very minimal area. You know, two public water wells, which are groundwater, were closed. They were over the then federal health advisory of a hundred parts per trillion, and a handful of private wells. They reported maybe 13 wells, so they were acting like no big deal here. And we started asking about the other public wells because it isn't a leap to say if groundwater is contaminated. And the river is contaminated. All groundwater is contaminated. It's not gonna respect a 0.5 mile radius. So we pushed and that was expanding, expanding, expanding, and still expanding. So all of the public water supplies, all of the private wells in nine towns at this point are acknowledged.

Greg Dalton: And why wasn't this caught? This was so bad. Was was government sort of falling asleep on the job?

Laurene Allen: Well, we have a broken regulatory system for chemical, you know, rubber stamping in, in a national level. I've worked on that and New Hampshire is a very anti-regulatory, hands-off, business friendly state. So this was the perfect state for a company who was not invested. You know, this is a foreign entity that saw the opportunity to make profits. They could cook faster, hotter, and pollute, and really make their shareholders happy while claiming to be environmental stewards and good neighbors. That was their branding.

Greg Dalton: And so you were, you know, a clinical social worker at the time. What were you hearing about people's health? Or was this, you know, other than, you know, detection in the wells that you mentioned, was it manifesting in people?

Laurene Allen: Well, people, you know, when we see health issues, we think it's genetics. We think it's lifestyle. We think, oh, sooner or later it's gonna catch up to us if we aren't living a healthy life. So there are people, a lot of people like that New Englanders are very, very stoic, as you said. When you say, how are you doing? They say they're fine. They do not self-disclose. So at the early informational meeting, instead of coming up to the microphone and asking about, what are you doing about this? And the nuts and bolts, they were disclosing health patterns in their families and in their neighborhoods and what they were seeing. I was stunned to hear that level of self-disclosure, people who were uncomfortable talking about this, but they felt compelled to ask, and at the end they would say. Could it be the water? Which means they were wondering why is this happening? And there isn't a state anywhere that's going to say, yes, it's the water. I understand that. But they were told. We don't really have any way to connect exposure to outcome. These are emerging contaminants. We know nothing about them. And I start Google searching and finding NIH studies and And, uh, the science was there, it just wasn't being looked at.

Greg Dalton: So you co-founded Merrimack Citizens for clean water to be a voice for these people. What did you think your odds were? As an individual, small number of people going up against a big, multi big corporation.

Laurene Allen: Well, people in town were really furious. You know, they wanted 'em closed. They didn't lose a day of business. They didn't pay a penny in fines, and it was business as usual and they really don't have accountability. And it was a trust issue in my area, in my town, at that point, there were people who were trying to make it very political and they saw myself as potentially politically motivated, which was really interesting to me.

Greg Dalton: But still jobs and still, you know. Did you have people, openly hostile toward you? 'cause I've talked with other Goldman award winners.

Laurene Allen: Yes.

Greg Dalton: Do you ever think about backing off?

Laurene Allen: No. No, because I knew it was not right. Something was not right there. The original slides when it came to the health piece were minimal. There was a slide that basically said nothing almost where they're found and talked about Teflon pans and popcorn bags, which are important. We can do something about that, but didn't address public health and environmental health at all. Those slides had a little logo in the corner of a company called 3M, that is one of the original manufacturers of PFAS. And when it hit me after the fact, when I did my own research, I realized, wow, in the community's hour of need, you're showing us slides from 3M. So a lot of our leaders in the town and elected officials were getting information from industry and lobbyists, and they were buying it.

Greg Dalton: In these situations, the workers, in one sense, have the most to lose 'cause it's their, their livelihood. On the other hand, they're often the most exposed and at risk. So did they slip information to you secretly, or how, how did that play out?

Laurene Allen: Yep. I heard stories about things being poured down floor drains and actions initially. Then I heard about health issues that workers were floor workers, so they were not paid as well as their research and development and management. Very well paid on that level. So there are a lot of manufacturing jobs in Southern New Hampshire. They could have left, but they didn't, and they had health benefits that they felt were extraordinary. So I asked a few workers about that. What do you mean extraordinary? How a health benefit is a health benefit? And I heard the most chilling example I've ever heard. They said, well, this company has treated us so well that my friend who work here was diagnosed with kidney cancer. Now kidney cancer is what you're going to see with PFOA is the top cancer. In our area, 67% higher than statistically significant, 67% Also, you see this in the C eight study in West Virginia and Parkersburg. So he told me a story of his friend who thought he was very fortunate because his wonderful company said, don't use your health insurance benefits, take care of it. Set him up with kidney dialysis in his home. So off record and not going through insurance and really quiet

Greg Dalton: So that it wouldn't be reported. Is that what you're saying?

Laurene Allen: It was a way of, so the workers felt that, oh, look at the special treatment we're getting, they're really taking care of us. And they weren't connecting where the cancers came from. And that was just one story. So for whatever reason, you know, they've worked very hard to create this image, reduce responsibility and not, they knew. They knew these chemicals were harmful.

Greg Dalton: So, yeah. So my employer's so nice. They're gonna take care of the cancer that their job is giving to me. Okay. I'm trying to understand that. And so in your acceptance speech at the Goldman Environmental Prize, you said, "I have met people who refuse to be broken." Say more about that.

Laurene Allen: Oh my gosh. That's what's kept me going. In summer of 2017, I was at a conference in Boston, the first PFAS National, gathering anywhere with people from across the country. And these folks are telling stories from the south side of Tucson to clean Cape Fear in North Carolina where Shi Moores make makes these poisons. And you're hearing these stories of cancers and illness and people who look, uh, their lifestyle may have been good enough that they look healthy. You know, I look relatively healthy, but you know, what I see happening in my body and what other people seeing happening in their neighbors, in their streets, it's very, it breaks you. But we know each other so well better than my closest friends actually. They know a part of me, people from across this nation that what it feels like and what you see and how you have to push forward it, it really is very, very broken.

Greg Dalton: So, and, and the people who are really sick refuse to be broken. At Climate One, we've been talking about the gutting of different federal agencies. We sat down with Gina McCarthy, former EPA administrator recently, and she's amazing. Gina McCarthy talking about all the cuts happening at the EPA. Looking ahead, what do you think about effective strategies to public health in these times?

Laurene Allen: A lot of people are feeling very discouraged. I have some amazing scientists, academic friends that I've met in this journey, a lot of great NGOs, and they're feeling really frightened and they should be, and they're saying, why aren't you feeling frightened? I said, well, I'm feeling frightened about a lot of other stuff politically right now, but this topic, when I started this journey in New Hampshire, we had 100% 70 something year old Republican men who were very tight with New Hampshire. You know, the Heritage Foundation, Americans for Prosperity, and they did not believe in science in anything like this, and they were there. So I worked in that climate. I also worked for four years under the first Trump administration, and there is progress. You know, we made progress. Nothing federally got over the finish line, but a lot of plans were laid out at that time. So I have worked in conditions that are less than ideal in New Hampshire and federally. And I know if we step back and say, oh, three and a half more years, and then we can get things done again, we can't think like that.

Greg Dalton: An inspiring part of this story is that you were not an environmental scientist or water quality expert. You know, it kind of brings to mind Erin Brockovich, which I re-watched recently, which is very similar. So what lessons did you learn that were most helpful in your organizing?

Laurene Allen: You know, I wonder, you know, I'm not saying men can't do this 'cause we have some great men who've stepped up in her community and taken roles on, but women have this quality where if we don't see that somebody's getting it right, we just roll up her sleeves and say, all right, somebody's gotta do this, and we jump in. Right. We jump in and I realized after the first year petitions and you know, screaming, yelling at people in meetings and saying, you owe us this. Do the right thing and protest. They're important for giving people a voice, but they're not going to solve the problem. You have to become your own expert because no one is coming to save you and when no one's coming to save you. Mama Bear does step in. I love people and I can't, I can't see people harmed.

Greg Dalton: Laurene, your story is really inspiring. Thank you for sharing with us.

Laurene Allen: Thank you.

Ariana Brocious: Coming up, a civil engineer quits his job to challenge environmental damages caused by the industry he used to work for:

Carlos Mallo Molina: It was a lot of opposition. Some of my ex-colleagues were sending me like messages saying, Hey, what you are doing is wrong. You are going to kill the employees in this island. We are already struggling here.

Ariana Brocious: That's up next, when Climate One continues.

This is Climate One. I'm Ariana Brocious. Another winner of this year's Goldman Environmental Prize is Carlos Mallo Molina. He led a campaign to prevent construction of Fonsalía Port, a huge recreational boat and ferry terminal on the Canary Islands, off the coast of Morocco, because of the threats it posed to wildlife habitat and ocean biodiversity. Now Molina is working to create the Island's first marine conservation and education center. He spoke with Greg Dalton on the Climate One stage.

Carlos Mallo Molina: I was born by the ocean in the north of Spain and my dad was a civil engineer who was building ports, so I was always by the sea and I learned how to love it. And especially because my mom, because I agree that women are better in conservation than men. And I've been fully supported by incredible women. So I think from when I was a kid, I was just loving the ocean so much.

Greg Dalton: And then you, you became an engineer and you were building some roads leading to this port. And then, then what happened?

Carlos Mallo Molina: And a lot of things happened, but I remember some of them, like when I was working in Tenerife and I was, this highway was on top of the mountain. And so going up, that is the biggest, uh, mountain in Spain is volcano, but is like the highest. Of all Spain. So I can see the whole ocean there. And sometimes you can see the whales jumping and sometimes just see this blue ocean, sometimes the sunsets. And I was thinking like, wow. So I'm building this road and at the end of this road there is going to be a port, a massive port with cruises, ferries, 400 recreational boats that they're potentially going to damage all of this environment and all of this amazing area and that was probably the biggest.

Greg Dalton: So that was in Spain where you're working and then, then you went to, I believe you went scuba diving somewhere and had kind of a, a change.

Carlos Mallo Molina: Yeah. Yeah. In Spain, I was scuba, I, I've been in scuba diving since I was a kid. It's what makes me keep going. I think being underwater and like, uh.

Greg Dalton: Calms you and soothes your soul.

Carlos Mallo Molina: Yeah. All the stress goes away. All the problems go away. And I'm myself again. So, but I remember this trip, when I was in this kind of dilemma of what I'm doing with my life that I went to Thailand. And I discovered what is marine conservation, because I never really, in Spain, marine conservation hasn't been a thing. It's still starting. And I met this amazing group of people doing marine conservation in a conservation center. And they brought me to the ocean and they were like, wow, you know, all the things that engineering, we can things together. And I have this moment that is on my first whale shark that I never saw in my life. And that whale shark was surrounded by plastic everywhere. So it was kind of an oxymoronic situation that I was like, this is so wrong. And uh, I think that was the click when I decided to, I was going to quit my job.

Greg Dalton: And did you think that as an engineer until that point that you were doing harm?

Carlos Mallo Molina: I learned that I was doing harm. Yeah. I remember like when I was checking all of the designs and all of the construction and basically all of the numbers like we put, engineers put a lot of effort on the structures and like security, but it, when, when it comes to, to health, well, health and safety was growing at that time, so I'm happy that that's better. But when it comes to environment, many times, my bosses were like, well, don't worry too much about the environmental part. We need to open the road. Or like, so it was not prioritized.

Greg Dalton: So in 2021, you basically ran a global campaign to raise awareness about the impact of the Fonsalia port on the oceans ecosystem in the Canary Islands, which is off the coast of Morocco, south of Spain. And so what role did climate science and the climate crisis play in that campaign kind of, opposing this port and the sort of Hawaii of Europe?

Carlos Mallo Molina: Yeah, so to explain to you that I, we need to come back to 2016 when the government actually built a massive port in the east side of the island. This port was called

Granadia. The government says it was going to create thousand of like, like, of employees, and it was going to really bring a lot of wealth to the island. That port was finished in 2017, 18, and is there without any use since then. It's abandoned, it's doing nothing.

Greg Dalton: So we call that a white elephant. Lots of money that didn't do what it was supposed to.

Carlos Mallo Molina: And destroyed all the sea grass and destroyed so much. Like it was, it was really bad. So I guess the opportunity was that we have that example and Covid happened. When Covid happened, everybody was at home and everybody was understanding, wow, how much we need nature. Nobody wanted to be home, everyone wanted to be on the beach or going to the mountains. So people started creating that. Um, maybe being more sensitive -

Greg Dalton: Awareness.

Carlos Mallo Molina: Awareness, more awareness. Um, so all of that helped, but also the climate emergency, like the, it was declared in Europe, so it was like, we are in the middle of a crisis of climate. So there was a lot of things happening that supported this movement to be successful.

Greg Dalton: Right. So some timing, some awareness, connection with nature. What kind of opposition did you get from your former, uh, I understand your parents were split, but what kind of opposition did you get from your former colleagues, civil engineers? You know, you kind of left the tribe and now you're doing this crazy stuff.

Carlos Mallo Molina: No, none of them, well, most of them didn't understand what I was doing. Um, and then years after I brought them scuba diving and they started to understand, but it was, it was hard because I was like quitting my job. I was just receiving a like, a big award in innovation in construction in England, because at that time I went to England to work and when I quit, my boss was like, are you crazy? Like, what happened? Did you hit your head or what? Uh, so yeah, it was a lot of opposition. Um, and what, when I went actually against the port, some of my ex-colleagues were sending me messages saying, Hey, what you are doing is wrong. You are going to kill the employees in this island. We are already struggling here. Like, and yeah, it was bad.

Greg Dalton: People think of trade, there was a lot of trade disruption during covid, right? People understand supply chains. You would need to get, those people probably didn't even think about supply chains. But during Covid they're like, oh, this, these things are important. Ports are a big part of that. And you're, you're, you're, you're potentially threatening that. So you went around sort of two, sort of politician by politician. What case did you make? Was it a moral case, ecological case, business case? What was your campaign?

Carlos Mallo Molina: My part of the campaign was of course to prove that there was another solution that the port was not necessary from the technical point of view and, and also support the environmental impact that was going to be huge. But of course there were some scientists when, because when the politicians were, okay, what whales they are here, they have the data. We have a population of pilot whales, over 300 of them living here all year. So, uh, but I think what I think we use a lot, it was speaking to the politicians and saying, what is the island you want in the future? Like, you want this island to be dead? No marine mammals, like, no, the ocean really destroyed. Uh, so what are you going to show to the tourism that want to see the sea turtles if you don't see, you don't have sea turtles? So that helped the politician to understand that this was also a business case to save the economy of the island through tourism.

Greg Dalton: Right, because if you kill all that stuff that where, what's the economy of be gonna be

based on. A lot of people start nonprofits around marine conservation, but it's really difficult to keep them afloat, so to speak. Was there a moment when you thought that like, oh, I don't know if I can keep this alive or keep going?

Carlos Mallo Molina: Every year. It's still hard. So actually Spain is even harder because as I said, like Spain doesn't still understand what marine conservation it is starting to be a thing, but very, very starting. So, uh, to me, my strategy was also to open the 501c3 here in the US. And I tried to meet amazing people that I was so lucky. And there is a woman in this room that has been incredibly supportive to this organization. So finding these amazing people in the US that supports the mission of my organization has been key.

Greg Dalton: And right now, environmentalists in this country are really scared because they think their, their targets, their nonprofit status could be challenged. Their funding is insecure, and that fear is part of the point to make people afraid to, to either distract them, to have them lawyer up and hire lawyers. So how do you think you're gonna need to adapt in the future? And there particularly, there's, there's talk about targeting organizations that transfer funds in or out of the United States. So that would target you, who fundraises in, in the United States. I think you have a nonprofit based here, right? So how's that future looking? How are you gonna adapt?

Carlos Mallo Molina: Like, I feel I've been in the, metaphorically, I've been in the jungle from the beginning. Like, you know, when the organization was at year two and we were starting having some traction doing expeditions and having people coming and donating to do an expedition. Covid happened and we couldn't do expeditions. So it's like I feel I've been in a challenge after challenge that this is just one more. I think it's going to be fine. And in this country there is amazing people like you, like Mike, like Lorraine, so like Thea and like other people that I love so much in this country that you together will, will win this fight. For sure.

Greg Dalton: You've had this big moment. What do your colleagues and family members think of you now?

Carlos Mallo Molina: Well, they are all applauding me and saying that what I'm doing is amazing. Of course. And, and I don't, I don't judge them. I think I, I think they were right. They were trying to protect me.

Greg Dalton: Well, you, you proved them wrong. So now you've accepted the Goldman Environmental Prize. And you're here in San Francisco with cameras and microphones and a big celebration. You've sort of, this is your moment of fame catapulted into fame, and fame is fleeting. So I'm curious how you're processing this moment, Laurene, we can start with you and experiencing right now. You're kind of at the end of this like. As you describe it, you're living it. Yeah.

Laurene Allen: Well, what Carlos said, resounded with me when he said, we face obstacles. So we know them and, but there's also good things that happen on this journey. Amazing things. This one is like no other I could ever imagine. And so it happens and it's a chapter, but the book is, is a forever book. This book never ends. You know, what our roles are that we've taken on and what we feel that we must do, and what you've walked away from what I've sacrificed career-wise, I relate to that. And you know, this is an immense platform, I think, to bring visibility. To this issue. I don't think it's about, yes, it's about celebrating us and our victories, but to me that isn't it. It's being able to utilize this visibility to further help people understand that it is up to us. It is up to all of us. We can't just feel depleted and defeated. We can do amazing things that people will get it right.

Greg Dalton: And Laurene, sometimes environmentalists are criticized for like being against everything. Stop, stop, stop. No, no, no. You stop the pla - you know, close down a plant. Uh, which

good for the people that are working well, maybe whether it's working, the people who are breathing that air and that plastic's gonna get made somewhere else in someone else's community. So do you think that. It's kind of like whack-a-mole stop here.

Laurene Allen: Of course, it's whack-a-mole. It always is. And that's our job to keep chasing, chasing, chasing.

Carlos Mallo Molina: Carlos, fame and attention can protect and boost you. It can also mark you as a target. And standing up for environment can be dangerous these days. Are you, are you thinking about your work differently as a result?

Carlos Mallo Molina: I have my mom, my mom here, so I dunno what to say. Yeah, I, I guess, I guess. That's not something I'm thinking about, I think is that like I, I love the ocean and I just gonna go for it.

Greg Dalton: That's great. Don't let them, you know, scare you, et cetera. At this point, you spent a lot of time around Goldman prize winners, current and previous. What have you learned from being welcomed into this community of heroes? Really?

Carlos Mallo Molina: I think it's a dream. I don't believe it yet. I knew about the Goldman prize because an ex-Goldman prize winner from Costa Rica that I've been like following. He was like my idol for a long time. He also helped me in Costa Rica to open a marine conservation center. This is Randall la out and he, I was having breakfast this morning, but I was actually scuba diving with him on Monday. So it's amazing because also thanks to this, now I can travel to more places.

Greg Dalton: So as we wrap up, I'd like to ask each of you in this moment when we're gathering to celebrate your courage and, and, and triumph, what lessons you would have for people who want to have an impact, who are maybe a little afraid, not sure where to fit in. I don't know if I have enough power, et cetera. Carlos, what's your advice on people who wanna follow in your path? You know, it's hard to follow in your path, but yeah. What's your advice for people who wanna get engaged?

Carlos Mallo Molina: When I get this question, I always say like, listen to your inner child. And if your inner child look at you and is sad, that's a bad symptom. Like that's a bad indicator. I think you wake up every morning and you are like, I am empty. I'm not happy what I'm doing. Do something to change it. Because there is, everybody has a passion.

Greg Dalton: Did you feel empty when you were waking up?

Carlos Mallo Molina: One hundred percent. Okay. I was so empty and, and my mom can't give credit to that. Like I was really so empty. So empty. I was like, what I'm doing is not making me happy. So what's the point of living like that? And I think a lot of people, especially in big cities, are like feeling that way. I think big cities are separating us from the nature. And so yeah, look at your inner child and if he's happy with you. You are in the right path.

Greg Dalton: And if you're not, change it.

Carlos Mallo Molina: Change it and jump. And it's okay because in this, I mean, especially the people living in the societies we live, like the development countries, we can come back to whatever we were before. We're not gonna lose much.

Greg Dalton: If you failed, you could have gone back to being an engineer or something. Laurene, how about you in terms of finding that inner guidance or inspiration for people who are trying to seek their path?

Laurene Allen: Go outside. I would be too scared to scuba dive, but walking the ocean in the winter when I have a tough week, I head for the coast, I walk, the ocean is there for us. And we know that. So you have to go outside and you have to feel it. But when you see something that's wrong, you know? Yeah. Listen to your conscience and say, who else feels my way? You need to find like-minded people. You need to connect. You need to see if there are groups in your state or community groups that are out there, that you can work together with you. You're gonna work smart and work with people. Don't be alone with your truths.

Greg Dalton: You are inspiring. I've interviewed a lot of people. You are really inspiring. So Laurene and Carlos, thank you for your courage and for your work. And thanks.

Laurene Allen: Thank you.

Kousha Navidar: Hey it's Kousha, before we close out our show, Ariana and I wanted to share with you one more thing that's on our minds. So mine is pretty simple this week but really touched me. So as you know the phrase, April showers bring May flowers, well where I live in New York City it's just been April showers bring more May showers, because it's been raining all the time. But this past weekend it opened up and became dry and everything bloomed. And it was the first weekend I could go to Central Park and celebrate my friend's birthday. And I was just out in the sun and I was like, oh man, I'm really grateful for Earth. It was really nice.

Ariana Brocious: The healing power of sun and fresh air and flowers, yeah. Mine's a bit more policy-oriented. I noticed a headline this week that 15 Democratic states have filed a challenge to President Trump's declaration of the energy emergency. And this is something we've talked about on the show before, it's kind of an odd declaration to make at this time when the US is producing SO much energy, fossil fuel and otherwise. So I'll be interested to see what happens there. It's part of the many, many things we're watching, and curious to see how the administration responds to this challenge .

Kousha Navidar: Yeah and there's so much policy stuff going on that it's tough to cover every week so it's interesting to hear the pieces you're looking at too.

Ariana Brocious: And remember, listeners, if you have ideas for things we should feature or talk about in this little lat segment, send us an email. Ariana at climate one dot org or Kousha at climate one dot org.

And that's our show. Thanks for listening. Talking about climate can be hard, and exciting and interesting -- AND it's critical to address the transitions we need to make in all parts of society. Please help us get people talking more about climate by giving us a rating or review. You can do it right now on your device. Or consider joining us on Patreon and supporting the show that way.

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