

I was born and raised in a town of 9,000 on an island in southeast Alaska. Being stuck on “the rock” gels our town into a community as tight-knit as the halibut jackets everyone owns at least one of (and maybe 4 or 5). I still hang out with the same people I hung out with in kindergarten and everyone knows everyone’s story.

Surrounded by these static circumstances, it’s easy to think that everyone thinks the same way and shares the same views. However, even in a town as small as mine, that is not the case.

Earlier this year, my friend and I organized a school walk-out about climate change. As preparation, I posted a brief message on a community Facebook group. Within an hour, it had over 20 comments, most of them negative. People were criticizing us, saying we kids couldn’t have possibly organized this on our own, that we were being used, that we were ignorant and too young to have valid opinions. Fortunately, the walk-out went really well, but I wasn’t at all prepared for so many negative comments. Before that, because of the people I spent all my time around, I hadn’t had any interactions with anyone who didn’t believe that climate change needs to be addressed. After all the push back, I was a lot more careful when planning future events and tried to stay away from places like Facebook where I knew I would get opposition.

Since this was my first interaction with climate deniers, this was also the only way I saw them. In my head, people who didn’t think climate change existed were mean and discouraging.

A few months later, my climate change group was planning to testify before our city assembly on behalf of a resolution declaring a climate emergency, and I was tasked with setting up a meeting with one of our assembly members who historically hasn’t supported efforts to combat climate change. I was extremely nervous for the meeting because of the last reaction I had been faced with and was apprehensive of conflict I thought was bound to occur. When our assembly member walked in however, he looked as nervous as I felt. It had never occurred to me that a member of the assembly could fear a group of high schoolers, but it made me feel a little friendlier toward him.

Our meeting was basically just the assembly member talking about his opinions on climate change and the resolution that was proposed. Although his opinions were very different from ours, he was respectful and explained where he was coming from. By the end of the meeting, although I still couldn’t completely understand why he thought what he did, I understood him as a person and not as a faceless Facebook rant. It also gave me courage to keep going with our resolution and testimony, because he actually seemed open to our positions.

Three days later was the assembly meeting where we testified on behalf of the resolution.

Proponents of the emergency declaration took up 45 minutes with our testimony. Although the resolution didn’t pass, there was so much support and my group was confident that we could overcome the assembly opposition.

The next day, I received an email from the assembly member my group met with where he said the meeting had left his stomach in knots and he was interested in compromising to pass another resolution. This was coming from someone who, just the Saturday before, had said that climate advocates were trying to take over the country to force everyone into socialism.

Then, two weeks after at the next assembly meeting, the assembly had a discussion regarding a resolution our group drafted and a resolution another assembly member had drafted, both declaring a climate emergency. During the discussion, the assembly member who we had met with, who again, identifies as someone who doesn’t believe in climate change, agreed to cosponsor one of the resolutions at the next meeting.

This incredible amount of growth from one meeting to the next is enough to convince me ten times over of the value of talking to people with different perspectives. Our assembly has also

been incredibly supportive of our group and willing to listen, and that has made this process so much easier. This experience has taught me that it will always be worth it to listen and to stand up for what I believe in, even if I expect opposition.