News
EarthBeat



Isabella Johnson demanded the city of Chicago declare a "climate emergency" at the Oct. 7, 2019, Youth Climate Strike. Johnson, 17, leads the organization that planned the event. Her pin reads "There is no planet B." (Zack Fishman)



by Heidi Schlumpf

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Climate activist Isabella Johnson is planning a massive Earth Day protest that requires permits and other paperwork with the city of Chicago. But she is finding it challenging to get to the city's offices before they close at 4:30 p.m.

That's because she is still in high school.

As the leader of the Illinois chapter of the Youth Climate Strike organization, 17-year-old Johnson has helped organize four Chicago protests that are part of an international movement that encourages students to skip school to advocate for action on global warming and environmental justice.

Johnson, a senior at Benet Academy, a Catholic prep school about 35 miles west of downtown Chicago, oversees 20 volunteer staff and regularly takes a train downtown to meet with adults from partner organizations. She squeezes in responses to media during homeroom and lunch.

"I try to fit in my homework somewhere in there, too," she said.

Now Johnson is working on what she hopes is her biggest youth protest yet, the April 22 event that could attract some 15,000 or more Chicago-area youth.

"I'm really passionate about all these things," she told NCR's Earthbeat. "I saw something that needed fixing in the world, so I decided to spend my time fixing it."

Johnson is quick to share facts about the seriousness of the crisis, citing the estimate that the world has about 12 years to avoid disastrous consequences from global warming.

"I think climate change is one of the most important issues of today, just because it is so time sensitive," she said. "We're damaging the earth. It's our home; it's our earth; it's God's creation."

But being in the spotlight has not always been easy for Johnson, who grew up in nearby Naperville. She has faced online bullying and struggles with her own mental health.

What keeps her grounded — and motivates her activist work — is her faith.

Youth stepping up

Last fall, while in Colorado checking out prospective colleges, Johnson had the chance to meet Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg while backstage at that state's climate strike.

Johnson thanked Thunberg and apologized for President Trump, who had publicly mocked the activist during her visit to the U.S. Thunberg, in turn, thanked her and the other Colorado activists.

The whole experience was "mind-blowing," Johnson said. "Without her, I would not be doing what I'm doing."

Johnson also owes her activism career to her older sister, Olivia, who in 2018 took her to her first protest after the school shooting in Parkland, Florida. For the first time, "I felt like I could create change, too," she recalled.

Johnson began to educate herself about the issue of gun violence and about politics. That's when she decided to trade her involvement with track and cross country for political activism, especially around environmental issues.

"Because the adults and the politicians aren't doing enough about this, it's been left to the youth," said Johnson. "Most youth activists say they don't want to do this, but we've been forced to."

As a state leader, she created an ambassador program that allows students outside the core team to get involved at a lesser level. Illinois now has more than 100 ambassadors, and the program has been replicated by other state chapters.



Johnson and fellow Youth Climate Strikers skip school to call for environmental justice. The sign reads: "Climate change strikes hard, we strike harder." (Zack Fishman)

In the next month, Johnson will join other activists in Puerto Rico for a five-day conference to educate themselves about the effect of climate change there. Then she will lead a group to the Illinois state capitol to lobby for the Clean Energy Jobs Act, which would require Illinois to switch to 100% renewable energy and find new jobs for displaced fossil fuel workers.

In the meantime, she is arranging the sound system, an American Sign Language interpreter, accessibility and safety requirements, and other logistics for the Earth Day event.

Johnson's parents, Matthew and Cindy, are impressed with their middle daughter's professionalism, leadership and communication skills. When a Chicago newspaper tried to get her to respond to a critic of the youth movement, she said she would like to sit down and talk with him. "That's quite a mature response," Matthew said.

The Johnsons, who are both Catholic, said they recognized Isabella's compassion at a young age. Said Matthew: "She has always cared a lot about people, about her friends and the greater community."

Connected to God

Like many in her generation, Johnson has disagreements with the Catholic Church. She supports gay marriage, believes women should be priests and is pro-choice. She gets frustrated with conservative Catholics who deny the urgency or even the existence of global warming.

But even as a young girl, she had always felt a strong connection with God and was inspired by the church's teachings on social justice. She attended a Catholic grade school, Sts. Peter and Paul in Naperville, and credits her mom and aunt with helping to nurture her own faith.

Johnson said Benet religion teacher Maureen Fariello helped her understand the context of her activism during a church history course.

"Isabella listened to the teachers of her church throughout time and figured how to fashion her faith into words and works that incarnate what we believe to be beautiful, good and true," Fariello said in an email to NCR.

But last summer, Johnson felt conflicted about her faith and her climate work. The environmental activism community is interreligious and diverse, including some young people who are not connected to institutional religion.

"It seemed like my faith and my activism were two separate things," Johnson said. "I felt like the church didn't support what I was doing."

So she prayed about it. A couple of days later, she got what she considers an answer to that prayer, when some Sisters of St. Joseph in nearby La Grange invited her to speak at an environmental justice prayer service.

Sr. Kathy Sherman, a composer and activist, had seen Johnson on television and wanted to lift up younger voices at the event. "We are doing what we can to support young people, because we know that this kind of work can get very lonely. There's a great need for community and support," Sherman told NCR.

Learning that the Sisters of St. Joseph and others in the church are coworkers in the fight for environmental justice helped Johnson see not only that her faith and activism are compatible but also that they are two sides of the same coin.

"I think God wants us to be involved in this stuff," Johnson said, adding that the enormity of the climate problem requires structural change "not just shorter showers and not using straws."



Johnson said the church's teachings on social justice have inspired her environmental activism, although not all students at her Catholic high school share her passion for the cause. (Zack Fishman)

Negative blowback

Although she is happy that Pope Francis has made environmental justice a priority, she said that a number of students at her Catholic high school say they do not believe in human-made climate change, likely repeating the politics of their more conservative parents.

Fighting climate change "has become such a partisan issue and it shouldn't be, because it's really about saving our planet, which affects everyone," Johnson said.

Even more strongly negative attention has been directed at her online, where she was once called a "baby-killer" for her views on abortion. But she refuses to be deterred.

"I guess if you're not getting hate for what you do, then maybe you're doing something wrong," she said. "It must mean I'm getting through."

Still, her parents are concerned about "the social media blowback." "We pray for her — for all our kids — every day," said Matthew, who admits he doesn't agree with all his daughter's views.

"My kids are challenging the world, and as they challenge the world, they're challenging the church and their parents at times," he said.

Some of the pushback has taken a toll on Johnson, who struggles with depression and anxiety. She has noticed that mental health issues, such as self-harm, eating disorders and physical manifestations of stress, are common among young activists.

"I don't know a single activist who doesn't go to therapy," she said. "I know kids who have panic attacks because they're overwhelmed by 'eco-anxiety.' The weight of this topic is terrifying: What if this doesn't get fixed? I try not to think about that."

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For her own mental health, Johnson has learned about the importance of self-care and taking time for herself. And she has gotten involved with a mental health awareness group at her school to help address the stigma of mental illness.

"I guess that's my activism side taking over," she said.

While she waits to make decisions about college next year, she has decided that while activism will always be part of her life, she may not make it her life's work. "It's so exhausting, being in that world 24/7," she said.

But Johnson has no regrets. "It's been a good way to spend my teenage years," she said. "Thirty years from now, I want to be able to say I fought for this. I tried to save

the climate."

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