The Global Coolers - a story

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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- confidential/embargoed narrative from Sub Assistant Gaia -

It was another day of helplessness at our Middle School when more children than usual came into the office having asthma attacks. Diesel-soot tinged breezes had again invaded the school yard and classrooms.

We were being hit from an additional direction, and it was related to the air-quality situation: the newspapers and even Fox News had another depressing story on the disappearance of entire glaciers. Climate change was out of control, while efforts to deal with it were so much talk. The emotions rising in many of us included fear, rage and disgust.

But this day onward was to mark a clear response and see constructive emotions come into play, by more people than anyone would have supposed. One child was to spark a sea change in the mood and aspirations of millions of people who had been complacent and lacking in hope.

Before I go on with my story, let me explain that because I'm still employed by the school district as a teacher's aid, this narrative is being held back for a short time. I can't give my name, or the place I work, even though few would suspect me of helping to guide a very disobedient campaign of civil disobedience -- when I appear to be such a strait-laced little woman. As soon as this background can be released, you will be reading about how we turned society on its ear back in 2008 and gave the U.S. a better name before the family of nations.

This piece of recent history is what more children need to hear, but I expect a lot of folks will welcome this report with great interest when it's by the well-known but mysterious Sub Assistant Gaia. I wore a fairly good disguise for my rare public appearances, and that will continue for a little while. I need to avoid any hassles by some resentful person or party, so I'll guard my privacy until things cool off (as the saying goes). But when I write this I feel I am speaking to you, you who dithered on climate protection until the children upset you and shamed you into giving serious attention to the world's faltering ecosystem.

The tide has been turning steadily, politically as well as sea-level wise, so I doubt anyone would try to make trouble for me. Even if I were ever convicted of something, a governor or the future President would pardon me. But to play it safe, and to avoid our movement becoming too focused on personalities, I'm going to remain in the shadows a little longer. It can help foster the empowerment of the grassroots and youth who must keep taking action to keep up with the challenge of our day. Besides, I want to travel without the spotlight of fame on me (that can attract fans and foes, worshippers and torturers).

What pushed me over the tipping point to help get the big ball rolling was seeing one of my favorite students, little Kaitlin, after our school-day ended, show a new painting to her mother as she pulled up in their new SUV. "Look Mom, this is the last polar bear standing on the last iceberg!" Her mother said, "Very nice. Now get in, we're late!"

"But Mom," Kaitlin said with her arms folded and standing away from the SUV, "I know this car is one of the reasons for the end of the polar bears and Arctic Ice. And what are we doing about it? Nothing!" Kaitlin began to cry, and screamed "Nothing! I'm going to walk!" She was about to turn on her heel, but seemed to want some company.

This little scene attracted the attention of other children and parents. Kaitlin's mother, who must have thought of herself as a progressive person who did what she could by recycling and having a "Peace" decal on her car, felt embarrassed. She came up to Kaitlin, who was 12 years old and sort of wiry strong, to take her forcefully by the hand and put her in the car.

But Kaitlin resisted and would not unlock her arms. Several children standing around gathered and chimed in, "Yeah! I'm gonna walk too!" and "Forget these global warmer machines!" "Let's walk, Kaitlin!"

The children began to close ranks into a tight circle and began jabbering about where to go first, Kaitlin's house or Susie's or Bobby's. Kaitlin's mother came up to me and said, "You. What have you been telling the children? My child has had nightmares over global warming!" I started to say, "Look, Ms. ..."

"You look. My name is Ashley Greenwood. My husband owns Greenwood Motors, and our vehicles are so good for the environment we've gotten the City's Green Living Award. So lay off Kaitlin. I'll have your job!" (I've changed these names.)

I brushed past Ashley and told the animated children, who were about a dozen, "Kids, let's have a little pow-wow over

here by our depaved garden. Your parents should come over too."

With that, our favorite spot in the whole school quickly became crowded and lively. There was an air of excitement that felt like a growing wave, as I look back, of inevitability. I'd never quite seen kids band together in defiance, nor had I known any to take their concerns for the environment past the limits imposed by their elders.

I immediately realized that if I were to take charge, I would defuse the almost magical coalescing of these kids. I felt so sad for them, as their world is destroyed by the older generation, finally having to rebel physically against pollution in their lives. And, I would probably get fired if I appeared to be some manipulative activist. So I just winked at Kaitlin and smiled, waiting patiently off to the side. I bowed out, and watched the kids begin to talk and plan their own afternoon.

Kaitlin's mother, beside herself, xpoke in Kaitlin's diection, "Kaitlin! You know I care about the polar bears! I gave you that DVD! Now we're going to be late for…" But the kids drowned her out with chanting, "Polar bears Yay! SUVs No! Polar bears Yay! SUVs No!" They formed a circle with hands held, just as we had done numerous times when we shared stories about "Mother Earth and her amazing creatures," and ignored their parents. Some of the school's officials were starting to circle the garden.

The Principal came over to me and said, "What's going on here?" I replied with wide eyes, sweetly and innocently, "Mr. Barker! (not his real name) This is interesting, I think little Kaitlin here blew her top over her mother's hypocrisy."

With a scowl he rarely let anyone see, he said to me under his breath, "Hey Miss… you're Julia, right? It isn't our place to judge or interfere." More authoritatively, and loudly, he said, "School is over. Dismiss this circle and leave. Report to my office in the morning."

"Mr. Barker, I am leaving. But I'm not the one organizing anything here. I'm just watching. This is my last day here anyway, so please don't get upset. These children need some calming encouragement. The asthma cases have been depressing for them and they know it's about the pollution of the environment."

The Principal looked at me and seemed to buy it. He started asking other adults around the garden what had happened, and he looked like he was about to break up the children's circle. He's the kind that believes tension is to be avoided at all costs, even if there's education to be gained. He put on his frozen smile that I'd seen before, and took a deep breath. Just then the children, who had been talking excitedly but not loud enough for anyone else to hear, began to wildly dig up the veggie garden.

"Children, children!" Barker yelped. "You're out of school for the day now! You'll be back tomorrow." He called out with a musical but condescending voice, "It's time to go home." Some of the mothers began pulling at the arms of the children, but there was resistance and yelling. "No! No!" "Let me be!" The children were digging up potatoes, and each student was clutching a few.

At a signal from one of the children, they all raced off toward the parking lot. On the way was Ashley Green's SUV that was still idling at the curb. Just then one of my students went up to the tailpipe and pounded a big potato into it. Rather than wait around, the kids went off to the next car, and the next, and did the same thing. The kids were running through the parking lot, cheering as they went, stuffing potatoes up exhaust pipes.

They had run out of potatoes when they regrouped, and were whispering, just as Barker and some parents approached very huffily. The students relaxed and faced the adults with calm looks on their faces. They spoke to their respective parents, asking "Can I please walk home?"

As you should be aware, by this date in our illustrious society almost nobody walked or biked to and from school anymore (with exceptions some places), compared to the days when these parents and their parents went to school. So this request was received with consternation. "It's not safe," said one father to his daughter. "Maybe tomorrow," said a mother to her son.

One irate dad was clamoring for punishment. Several moms turned on him and went "Shush. It's over now." "No harm was done."

Before he could rave on, I announced "I'll be happy to walk some of the kids home. I have time." I was almost mobbed by some of the students who began to yell their appreciation. I have to admit I was loved and popular with many students. Just then a couple of my fellow staff members spoke up: "I can walk some of you home." A couple of parents muttered, "Okay." Some children asked if their parents would walk as well, but the replies were along the lines of, "I have the car here."

Down the street I walked, with four kids ranging from eleven to thirteen years of age. They were giddy with mischievous pleasure over putting the potatoes up the exhaust pipes. Kim said to me melodiously and joyously, "Aren't you glad you

don't have a car, Julia?" But I spoke with a sad note, "You know by now they've finished taking out those potatoes. Then what?" Mikey said, "So? We'll get more. Whole Foods has them right outside the entrance and we can run off with lots. Stole Foods! Haw haw!" I began to shake my head in disapproval, but was jabbed in the arm with a sharp object. It was Maria, holding some car keys.

"Where did you get those," I asked. She said, "Back at school. You didn't see these." And in the blink of an eye she dropped them into the storm drain next to us. I was shocked, but was soon trying to hide my smile. The other three children whooped with approval.

I stopped and said, "Listen my friends. I don't have a problem with what you're doing at all! But play it cool. You'll end up in Juvenile Hall and I'll go to jail. I still have a job with the school district even though it's my last day with you today. Please don't tell your parents that I'm your leader or anything like that. In fact, you don't need a leader. Just communicate to your fellow students, in other schools too, and keep your action groups small. And I never said any of this!"

"Okay." "Sure." "Thank you!"

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I reported to my next job, another Middle School in the City, the next day. As an environmental educator helping science teachers and doing miscellaneous assistance, I found myself in the usual mix of concerned students, those on Ritalin or Prozac, and the majority distracted with puberty. After a few days I struck up a conversation with a girl who was rather interested in nature.

"Did you hear about what happened on Friday at the (blank) Middle School? The kids would not get into their parents' cars, because they pollute and warm the globe. The kids ran around putting potatoes in exhaust pipes. One of them took ignition keys and tossed them down a storm drain." She said. "Yes. How did it happen? How much trouble did they get in?"

I replied that I did not know, but then I let fly with, "Does it matter? I think the kids got off because the parents and the Principal were just glad to see the insurrection end. No one was hurt. I was proud of them, but felt not so proud to be an adult compared to these brave children." Oh my, I thought, maybe I've gone too far with this child.

The girl, whom I'll call Francine, said "We've been talking about doing something like that here. But I didn't hear about the ignition keys! That's great."

After several more days on the new job site I got to know some fellow staffers and a few special kids. I was pointing out to Francine some spots on a big globe on a stand. I was lamenting that the cities were so numerous and important on the globe that the really important areas, such as rainforests, wetlands and glaciers, were depicted as if they were just secondary. She thought for a moment and seemed about to break into tears.

"Francine, we've entered a strange new era, but it's not all bad today. We've all been educated to believe we are trying to do the right thing as a society, and that we're a great nation. But none of this seems to make sense anymore. So Al Gore and James Hansen, the famous climate scientist with NASA, recently said that they'd like to see today's students blockading coal-fired power plants. Those are fairly conservative guys, and their comment is like something out of the Sixties. Do you know what happened in the Sixties?"

"Sure, the hippies. They had polluting cars and vinyl record players that warmed the globe. But yeah, they protested the war and other stuff. I'd go block the coal too, but how do I get there? My parents won't take me. All they do is talk, and they never change their ways." Her friends Jordy and Jess ambled up next to her.

Acknowledging them but continuing, I nudged Francine along with, "There are some things we can do right here in our neighborhoods. Soon global heating and weird weather might be felt to be a critical enough situation that kids are too busy to even be in school, as they take care of the climate crisis with all they've got."

Jordy piped up and showed he was a little more cynical and wise than I would have guessed. "I'm not sure why we're in school. Learning's cool, but without a decent climate what are we learning some of these subjects for? This student body is helping with the potato campaign for global cooling, but only a few cars a week are taken care of. Nobody's cutting class."

To keep on the positive, I said, "Did you hear about the people fasting, on hunger strikes, to try to push Congress into acting for climate protection?" The kids said they hadn't. Jess said with an evil smile, "Some of these piggy kids here ought to do it, for sure!"

It was time to go, but I told them not to give up, and that we'd talk tomorrow.

The next day I brought into the science class some pictures of tree-sitters in huge redwoods. I also had some seedlings for redwoods and oaks that I wanted to give away with a purpose. After the class was dismissed, I motioned Francine and Jordy over to me and said, "Look at these pictures. You know that despite the need for more trees, the corporations and government are chopping them down? We can't even have fruit trees on the streets or parks because of City policies. I brought you these seedlings."

"I don't have time," they said in unison. They looked at each other and I could see their attention dissipating and being replaced by despair and sullenness. "Well," Francine said, "If you meet us after school and plant some trees with us, can we get some extra credit maybe?"

I said, "Probably. But did you know that this whole area, hundreds of square miles, was not too long ago ancient redwood forests, and that they helped create fog and rain? And in the drier area, oaks grew so well that the Indians harvested acorns as a staple food. Between acorns and salmon, and other collectible wild foods, there was no need for agriculture or supermarkets around here for thousands of years."

They heard me, but I needed to inspire them to take the path of action. So over the weekend I took a trip to visit the tree-sit protest at University of California in Berkeley. At the huge police fence around the threatened Memorial Oak Grove I found a few young people who didn't seem all wrapped up in college courses. I met some real doers and got their support for "an action for tomorrow's tree-sitters." We hashed out a plan for galvanizing Jordy, Francine and many of their friends.

The next day I told Francine and Jordy both to get to school a little early the next day, and to bring their friends. "You'll see something exciting being done for the Earth. Get ready for student action that will shake things up. I'm just your messenger today. You'll be the ones the news reporters will talk to."

This is what I understand happened about twelve hours later: Just before dawn at the school entrance, a one-way driveway -- paved blacktop accessing the large parking lot -- was set upon by some young people wielding sledge hammers. With bandanas over the lower part of their faces, and wearing goggles or glasses, they pounded the asphalt and used crowbars and picks to undo the pavement. An area about eight feet long and two feet wide was quickly depaved. Some saplings were planted in the exposed soil, and watered. A woman with dreadlocks said to the green beings in the ground, "Survive and thrive. Please do your sacred stuff for the children of the future who will play on your branches and eat your acorns. Ho." Then, as dawn's rosy fingers spread across the eastern sky, the team sat on the ground around their handiwork, locked themselves together, and waited.

The first arrivals were school employees who were confused and didn't know what to do. They talked with the protesters about the need for jobs and not alienating workers or teachers who care so much about the environment. "Also," said one teacher, "we must teach the children to respect the law."

Buckeye, a seasoned protester with a long arrest record for this kind of trespass, said good-naturedly, "The laws protect pollution. The polluters own the legislators. Do you teach your students this?" The conversation continued, although the police were about to be called. The depavers needed to stall a while longer until students started showing up. Where were the early birds that "Julia said" would be there? (I myself would not be showing up early, and would stay out of the controversy so as to not blow my cover.) One of the protesters began taking the tools off to a nearby bike cart that had a cover to conceal the sledges, etc.

Just before the first school bus showed up, Jordy, Francine, Jess and several other kids gathered round the young trees and joined the group of protesters and staffers. A police car was coming down the street. The group of protesters handed some steel tubing and locks to the young students, who became part of the circle and locked themselves to it, and the group became larger and stronger. No one could break through the circle easily to get at the new "grove."

As a police officer was approaching, the earlier protesters were unlocking themselves and were replaced by students who all attend this Middle School. I later learned that Jordy said to Buckeye, "Are you going to help us further? Ever?" Buckeye said with a smile, "Just ask your sub assistant Gaia." That would be me, and that became my nom de guerre -- like "Subcomandante" Marcos of Chiapas.

By this time the protesters had to appear as mere bystanders, and began to wander off or pedal away as the crowd grew. The school buses were emptying curbside and the students were yelling, some in support and some in derision. The defenders of the young trees began chants that were picked up by many others: "Trees not asphalt!" "We need trees! Let us breathe!"

More police were showing up, but the school officials preferred mediating. There was too much going on for the officials to have the presence of mind to sick the officers on any bike-riding outside agitators -- quickly enough, anyway, so the Berkeley hippies were able to disperse as they headed toward subway stations -- with breakfast runs at any grocery store dumpsters that weren't locked.

In the tense negotiations around the little saplings it was agreed that the trees would be allowed to stand for one day at least, until a meeting on the subject of the school's response to global warming would be planned -- if the protesters would just be good and go off to class like responsible students. This was acceptable, but Jordy and Francine demanded to stay to guard the trees. They displayed whistles that they said would be used to call out the students if the trees were threatened. When the Principal threatened suspension, Jordy and Francine just ignored her.

A few media outlets were called (on my break), and some print and TV reporters showed up at the depaving site. By the end of the day much of the city had learned about the action. One reporter intoned for her cameraman and TV-land, "What we have here, Warren, is the children doing what we adults are not quite doing, when we shop for a better planet. This is Allison Brentwood for Live News; back to you, Warren." Fortunately, no one pursued the idea of investigating how the kids might have hefted the missing sledgehammers well enough to loosen pavement for removal, although some of the kids looked pretty big and strong.

I was told Kaitlin and Maria came over from her school to the depaving site, which now had a sign proclaiming the spot to be "Global Cooling Grove." As soon as they met Francine, Jordy and Jess, Kaitlin said "We'll have to do this at our school right away! And we'll email the other schools doing the potato stuffing about what has happened here. You guys are great! If you get suspended there's more time for action. Say, are you friends of Julia who works here?"

"Who?" came the reply.

Kaitlin looked at Maria, who just smiled.

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If it weren't for an early and intense Category 5 hurricane in May 2008 that devastated Miami and flooded much of Florida, combined with wrenching news of massive loss of Antarctica's ice shelf, the student rebellion coming out of the Middle Schools would not have taken off so spectacularly. As it was, we'd already managed to spread our modus operandi to other states via word of mouth, with help from tools like FaceBook, MySpace, radical websites, and whatever mainstream-news media noise could be generated. Some called the phenomenon the Earth Children's Revolution. Most people used the kids' own name, the Global Coolers.

Whereas Kaitlin and I had really touched off the movement, my next school was seen as a main originator of the trend. My low profile helped keep me anonymous. Other Global Cooler actions that immediately followed elsewhere, with their publicity, surpassed the original actions, further obscuring the start of it all, so my role was thankfully hidden. There were references to a guiding character named Sub Assistant Gaia, but she was more legend than tangible.

Targeting cars was a touchy business, not only because people needed them to get to work or depend on them for their businesses, but because some drivers identified their self-worth with their cars. To reward car users who car-pooled, such vehicles were usually not targeted by Global Coolers. New cars were especially targeted over older ones and any less fuelish models. Sometimes advisories were left on windshields about the desirable alternatives of walking, biking, and mass transit. These obvious options became more and more popular and unavoidable over the months due to very high gasoline prices, but also because of the way Global Coolers kept after single-occupant car usage like demons.

"American cars and pickup trucks are responsible for nearly half of the greenhouse gases emitted by automobiles globally, even though the nation's vehicles make up just 30% of the nearly 700 million cars in use," a statement rammed home repeated in our underground communiques to egg on the Global Coolers. And, "Why should this country's motorists be doing the equivalent of driving back and forth to Pluto more than 470 times?" The greenhouse-gas contribution of cars worldwide was about one-sixth of fossil-fuels' greenhouse gas emissions, but U.S. cars were the main factor inflating this sector's contribution globally.

The big environmental groups had said that Americans were going to be living down the SUV boom for a long time, and that "it takes a generation." But our communique had a problem with this, so we pounded home that "We don't have a generation to fiddle while Earth burns."

If it hadn't been for cars in the U.S. increasing their CO2 output in 2006, the United States could have done much better than cutting its overall emissions by 1.5%, which it did. On a local basis the car was identified as the worst culprit too, when the city of Seattle announced last year that it was soon to fail making its Kyoto Protocol targets because of the driving factor.

Ross Gelbspan, a major author on global warming, said last year that it is "...too late to avert major climate disruptions. No national energy infrastructure can be transformed within a decade." But Sub Assistant Gaia's widely circulated retort was, "Pulling the plug on the global warming machinery, as intelligently and gently as possible, does not take a decade.

Not even ten days."

In April I was still in my second Middle School job, advising in secret Francine and Jordy, who had a wide network by now. They were backed up by their parents, so when suspension came for these and several other kids, it was a chance to visit other schools and stage more actions around town. It seemed that several of my students' parents and other kids' parents were indeed changing their ways finally, now that they saw some outlet for their own concerns, even if the expression was primarily through their children.

About one month after the creation of our Global Cooling Grove, at least two dozen depaving operations had hit various schools, including High Schools. Often Middle School kids got some physical help from unnamed adults, whether older siblings, parents, or school staffers. These adults were also taking discussion on global heating, and the need to take strong action, into their work places, other schools and churches.

It was to be a couple more months before college campuses caught fire, regaining the spirit of the 1960s –- even though it was summer and most students were not on campuses. It was ironic that mid-teen pre-college students were visiting universities to spur the aspiring Yuppies to get with the program.

We had to know the facts on how the energy and ecological picture fit together, to pull in the fence-sitters. We admitted that while energy consumption is the major contributor of greenhouse gases, it's less than two-thirds, about 60% worldwide, of the global-heating source. (Within energy consumption, 40% is electricity and heat generation, another 20% is transportation and the remainder is building heat and industry.) This is why we were not focused only on eliminating the car and its carpet of oil (asphalt and concrete). Our widely circulated position was, "Deforestation is the second largest factor in heating our planet, after energy. So when we cut down on car use, we can take back the car's spaces for trees. And we close roads in forests to prevent clear cuts. We have been steering many young people to join restoration projects in forests to close roads and re-contour the land for the sake of our streams and the salmon."

Our depaving had more logic to it than denying space to cars. But pavement (a.k.a. tarmac or concrete) as a problem in itself was not something many people had thought about. Same for the idea of there being too many roads. But weather people have told us about the "urban heat island effect" for decades. Due to so much blacktop and lack of greenery, cities are hotter than surrounding areas. Rooftops (often with asphalt on them) also raise the temperature, especially when they're dark-colored to soak in the sun's heat. Cities are not cool.

The public everywhere was aware of what was happening in the cities and suburbs, in terms of anti-car sentiment and the depaving for urban gardens and orchards. Various kinds of sites were depaved in darkness and even broad daylight: city parking lots, shopping centers, and even portions of some airports. (Flying had become socially frowned upon -- my plans to go to Japan were met with rude orders to sail there instead of fly.) And, people were depaving their own driveways. Vegetables were being planted as well as trees.

Guerilla tree planting was in vogue in several cities, whether through depaving or just planting the trees in any spot of soil. Anyone trying to cut down trees met much resistance, even in the countryside and in several forests. Earth First! recruitment hit an a time high, enabling the activists to mount many times the usual number of tree-sits and lockdowns as before.

Vehicles were being plugged with potatoes in several states in the nation and in other countries, according to what we could tell. The corporate news media could not be trusted, so people had to obtain the real news -– in many cases, after making the news happen. Motorists had taken to securing their car keys to their wrists or the steering wheels. Such a motorist who thwarted the Global Coolers might find his or her tires deflated –- a practice that was big a few years ago in Europe against SUVs as a sport or fad.

The news media were letting a little coverage come though on sit-ins and road blockades against coal mining and fossil-fuel power generation. But the big breakthrough was when Al Gore and most of his family decided to take a photo-op for Mother Earth and get arrested in civil disobedience. "The tipping point for me and Tipper is our missing seasons back in Tennessee as we knew them. To get them back, and have a healthy society, we're taking a stand in the tradition of Martin Luther King, Jr." NASA scientist James Hansen was there too, increasing the likelihood of major press. As he and the Gores were cuffed and led away, there were tears in the eyes of the cops. Was it from the teargas?

John Edwards' presidential candidacy shot ahead of the pack when he came out for a five-year plan to slash greenhouse gases while saving 100,000 lives a year from car crashes and morbidity due to exhaust. This was through his advocating "The emancipation from the car." His son Wade had been killed in a car wreck, because of that "outmoded American habit: driving a personal car." John Edwards' position got a huge boost from Al Gore, who said, "I support John's approach partly because when my son was a little boy he was almost killed by a car outside a stadium. It is time we connect the senseless carnage of driving with global heating." Thanks to such boosts of moral authority and the tireless activity of the Global Coolers, a values-shift seemed to be happening regarding cars, much as had happened with cigarette smoking. Driving was becoming out of favor, aided by a few other factors, the largest of which was economic.

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Go to Part Two for the rest of The Global Coolers and to see links, at

culturechange.org