

GRETA THUNBERG: Climate catalyst

A Swedish teenager brought climate science to the fore as she channelled her generation's rage.

BY QUIRIN SCHIERMEIER



Credit: Michael Campanella/Getty

At a US congressional hearing on climate change in September, Greta Thunberg slid a slim bundle of papers across the table towards lawmakers. It was a special report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, predicting dire consequences as the world warms. “I don’t want you to listen to me, I want you to listen to the scientists,” she told the legislators. “I want you to unite behind the science and I want you to take real action.”

Scientists have spent decades warning about climate change, but they couldn’t galvanize global attention the way that Thunberg did this year. The Swedish 16-year-old has outshone them — and many are cheering her along.

“Some may wonder why a teenage girl should get more credit and attention for publicly lamenting a well-known dilemma than most climate researchers

get for years of hard work and effort,” says Sonia Seneviratne, a climate scientist at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich. But Thunberg is candid and her outrage unvarnished, and that is powerful, says Seneviratne. “As scientists, we normally don’t dare to express the truth in such heartfelt simplicity.”

Many researchers hail Thunberg in particular for focusing attention on climate change and its catastrophic impacts. What she has achieved should motivate climate researchers to carry on with their science despite slow political action, says Seneviratne.

“Greta has inspired scientists along with activists and policymakers,” says Angela Ledford Anderson, director of the Climate and Energy programme at the Union of Concerned Scientists in Washington DC. In July, German Chancellor Angela Merkel announced sweeping measures to reduce carbon emissions, and acknowledged that the protests Thunberg ignited “drove us to act”.

But perhaps Thunberg’s biggest influence will be on the next generation of scientists, Anderson says. “Her mobilization of young people shows the rising generation expects science to inform policy,” she says, “and may inspire many to become scientists themselves.”

BBC put presenter on a plane to interview Greta Thunberg

Sarah Sands, editor of BBC Radio 4’s Today programme, admits it ‘felt awkward’

PA Media

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Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg gives a speech. Photograph: Cristina Quicler/AFP via Getty Images

Putting a presenter on a flight to Sweden to meet climate activist **Greta Thunberg** “felt awkward”, the editor of BBC Radio 4’s Today programme has admitted.

The 16-year-old campaigner, who was a **guest editor on a special edition of the show**, avoids air travel because of its environmental impact.

The **BBC** sent presenter Mishal Husain on a return flight to Stockholm to interview her.

Programme editor Sarah Sands told the Sunday Times: “We did discuss that among ourselves. It felt awkward but we did not have the time for trains or boats.”

The paper said the trip to Stockholm is estimated to have amounted to almost half a ton of carbon dioxide emissions per person.



Greta Thunberg named Time magazine's person of the year

Greta started a **school strike** for the climate outside the Swedish parliament in August 2018, which has since spread all over the world to involve more than 100,000 schoolchildren.

She takes a stand against more polluting forms of transport by **sailing rather than flying** or travelling in cars.

Greta arrived in New York in August after a 15-day, 3,000-mile voyage across the Atlantic to take part in a UN climate summit.

She sailed from Plymouth in the UK on a zero-emissions yacht to limit the carbon footprint of her travel.

She then set sail in November from the US to a UN climate summit in Madrid, Spain.

Ms Sands said: "Greta is not actually judgmental towards individuals, accepting that other people will not all conform to her high standards and asking only for people to do what they can."

Greta Thunberg's father: 'She is happy, but I worry'

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Greta Thunberg's father says she is happier since becoming an activist

Greta Thunberg's father has said he thought it was "a bad idea" for his daughter to take to the "front line" of the battle against climate change.

Millions of people have been inspired to join the 16-year-old in raising awareness of environmental issues.

But Svante Thunberg told the BBC he was "not supportive" of his daughter skipping school for the climate strike.

Mr Thunberg said Greta was much happier since becoming an activist - but that he worries about the "hate" she faces.

As part of the same broadcast, guest-edited by Greta for **Radio 4's Today programme**, Sir David Attenborough told her she had "woken up the world" to climate change.

She called Sir David on Skype from Stockholm in Sweden, where she lives, and told him how he inspired her activism.



When Greta Thunberg met Sir David Attenborough for the first time (via Skype)

The broadcaster and naturalist told Greta she had "achieved things that many of us who have been working on the issue for 20 years have failed to do". He added that the 16-year-old was the "only reason" that climate change became a key topic in the recent UK general election.

Greta was nominated for this year's Nobel Peace Prize, after spearheading a global movement demanding world leaders take action over climate change. It led to **co-ordinated school strikes** across the globe.

She is among five high-profile people taking over the Today programme as guest editors during the festive period.

The BBC flew presenter Mishal Husain to Sweden to interview the teenager and her father.

On the decision to fly, Today editor Sarah Sands said: "We just did not have time for other means of transport. But we met our cameraman there and the interview between Greta and David Attenborough was conducted by Skype, which felt the right way for the two of them to communicate."

Struggle with depression

Speaking to Husain as part of the show, Mr Thunberg said his daughter had struggled with depression for "three or four years" before she began her school strike.

"She stopped talking... she stopped going to school," he said.

He added that it was the "ultimate nightmare for a parent" when Greta began refusing to eat.

To help her get better, Mr Thunberg spent more time with Greta and her younger sister, Beata, at their home in Sweden. Greta's mother, opera singer and former

Eurovision Song Contest participant Malena Ernman, cancelled contracts so the whole family could be together.

The family also sought help from doctors, Mr Thunberg said. Greta was diagnosed with Asperger's - a form of autism - aged 12, **something she has said allows her to "see things from outside the box"**.



KENA BETANCUR/GETTY IMAGES

Svante Thunberg and his daughter sailed to a climate summit in New York on zero-carbon yacht

Over the next few years they began discussing and researching climate change, with Greta becoming increasingly passionate about tackling the issue.

As "very active" human rights advocates, Greta accused her parents of being "huge hypocrites", Mr Thunberg said.

"Greta said: 'Whose human rights are you standing up for?', since we were not taking this climate issue seriously," he explained.

He said Greta got "energy" from her parents' changes in behaviour to become more environmentally friendly - such as her mother choosing not to travel by aeroplane and her father becoming vegan.

Mr Thunberg has also accompanied his daughter on her **sailing expeditions to UN climate summits** in New York and Madrid. Greta refuses to travel by air because of its environmental impact.

"I did all these things, I knew they were the right thing to do... but I didn't do it to save the climate, I did it to save my child," Mr Thunberg said.

"I have two daughters and to be honest they are all that matter to me. I just want them to be happy," he added.

Mr Thunberg said Greta has "changed" and become "very happy" as a result of her activism.

"You think she's not ordinary now because she's special, and she's very famous, and

all these things. But to me she's now an ordinary child - she can do all the things like other people can," he said.

"She dances around, she laughs a lot, we have a lot of fun - and she's in a very good place."

However, since Greta's school strike stunt went viral online, Mr Thunberg said she has faced abuse from people who "don't want to change" their lifestyles in order to save the environment.

Greta has said previously that people abuse her for "my looks, my clothes, my behaviour and my differences".

Her father said he was particularly worried about "the fake news, all the things that people try to fabricate her - the hate that that generates".

But he added that his daughter deals with the criticism "incredibly well".

"Quite frankly, I don't know how she does it, but she laughs most of the time. She finds it hilarious."



Greta at UN climate change talks - one year apart

Mr Thunberg said he hoped things would become "less intense" for his family in the future and that he thinks Greta "really wants to go back to school".

He added that as Greta turns 17 soon, she will no longer need to be accompanied on her travels.

"If she needs me there, I'll try to do it," he said. "But I think she'll be, more and more, going to do it by herself which is great."

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I wouldn't have

wasted my time on Trump, says Greta Thunberg

Michael Holden

4 MIN READ

LONDON (Reuters) - Teenage climate change activist Greta Thunberg said on Monday that talking to U.S. President Donald Trump at a United Nations summit on global warming would have been a waste of time since he would not have paid any attention.

In an interview with BBC radio's Today program, for which she was the guest editor on Monday, Thunberg also said she regarded personal attacks on her as funny and that she hoped to go back to having a

normal life.

A video of the 16-year-old Swedish campaigner giving Trump what media described as a “death stare” at a U.N. climate summit in New York in September went viral on social media. Trump has questioned climate science and is pulling the United States out of the 2015 Paris Agreement on global warming.

Asked what she would have said to the president if they had spoken, Thunberg said: “Honestly, I don’t think I would have said anything because obviously he’s not listening to scientists and experts, so why would he listen to me?”

“So I probably wouldn’t have said anything, I wouldn’t have wasted my time,” she said.

This month Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro called Thunberg “a brat”. Trump has said on Twitter she needs to work on her anger management problem.

“Those attacks are just funny because they obviously don’t mean anything,” she said. “I guess of course it means something - they are terrified of young people bringing change which they don’t want - but that is just proof that we are actually doing something and that they see us as some kind of threat.”

Thunberg came to world attention when she began a grassroots campaign aged 15 by skipping school every Friday to demonstrate outside the Swedish parliament. The protests have inspired millions of young people to take action against climate change.

PRAISE FROM DAVID ATTENBOROUGH

Thunberg, who was named Time Magazine's Person of the Year for 2019, said becoming an activist had helped rescue her from the depression she had previously been suffering.

She also spoke in Monday's BBC program with veteran British broadcaster David Attenborough, telling him how his nature documentaries had inspired her.

"You have aroused the world," the 93-year-old Attenborough told Thunberg in reply, adding that she had achieved things "that many of us who have been working on the issue for 20 years have failed to do".

Her father Svante Thunberg, also interviewed for the BBC program, said she had dealt very well with "the fake news, all

the things that people try to fabricate about her, the hate that that generates” while in the global media limelight.

“Quite frankly, I don’t know how she does it, but she laughs most of the time. She finds it hilarious,” he said.

The teenager rejoined activists outside the Swedish parliament this month after four months of overseas trips to attend climate conferences in New York and Madrid.

“I hope I won’t have to sit outside the Swedish parliament for long. I hope I don’t have to be a climate activist any more,” she said on Monday, adding she was looking forward to returning to school in August.

“I just want to be just as everyone else. I want to educate myself and be just like a normal teenager.”

Greta Thunberg's mother reveals teenager's troubled childhood

Swedish opera singer Malena Ernman gives emotional account of daughter's battles with autism and an eating disorder

James Tapper

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Greta Thunberg and her mother, opera singer Malena Ernman, at home in Stockholm. Photograph: Malin Hoelstad/SvD/TT/TT/PA Images

Greta Thunberg's extraordinary transformation from a near-mute 11-year-old into the world's most powerful voice on the climate crisis is revealed today by her mother.

In an emotional account, Malena Ernman describes how her daughter came to be diagnosed with autism, and how activism helped her overcome an eating disorder.

Ernman writes of the first indications that her elder daughter was unwell in extracts published in the *Observer* from *Our House is on Fire: Scenes of a Family and a Planet in Crisis*, a book by the whole Thunberg family.

"She was slowly disappearing into some kind of darkness," Ernman says. "She

stopped playing the piano. She stopped laughing. She stopped talking. And she stopped eating.”

Ernman, a celebrated Swedish opera singer, and her husband Svante Thunberg, an actor, struggled to deal with their daughter’s silence and refusal to eat anything except tiny amounts of rice, avocado and gnocchi.

She lost 10kg in two months and was on the verge of being admitted to hospital before turning a corner. Yet when Thunberg returned to school, her father realised she was being bullied. “The school isn’t sympathetic,” Ernman writes. “Their understanding of the situation is different. It’s Greta’s own fault, the school thinks.”

After recovering some weight, Thunberg was assessed by psychiatrists and diagnosed with “high-functioning” autism, which Ernman describes as Asperger’s, as well as obsessive compulsive disorder.

She went on to become attuned to the climate crisis, with the pivotal moment coming during a film shown in class about rubbish in the oceans, “an island of plastic” in the south Pacific. But after the lesson, while Thunberg was gripped with concern, other pupils enthused about a teacher’s trip to New York and flights to Thailand and Vietnam.

“Greta can’t reconcile any of this with any of what she has just seen,” her mother writes. “She saw what the rest of us did not want to see. It was as if she could see our CO₂ emissions with her naked eye.”

In the summer of 2018, Thunberg began her first school strike, taking a homemade placard to stand outside the Swedish prime minister’s office.

When she was joined by other activists, her father tried to persuade her to go home, aware of the emotional toll it was taking on her. But she refused and the time with other people had an unexpected effect on her.

On the third day, a Greenpeace activist offered Greta some vegan Thai noodles. “She takes a little bite. And another. No one reacts to what’s happening. Why would they? ... Greta keeps eating. Not just a few bites but almost the whole serving.”

Thunberg is expected to come to the UK this week to take part in a youth protest in Bristol.

Her presence at the Bristol Youth Strike 4 Climate on Friday has been welcomed with delight by the organisers. “We are all just so excited – everyone is so excited about the thought of hearing her talk,” said Milly Sibson, who, like Thunberg, is 17. “I would love the chance to meet her because she is the founder of this movement and she is so important to it – she is an idol even though she is younger than me.”