



LEADERSHIP CASE

MOTHERS OUT FRONT

"I hope," says Kelsey Wirth, "that my daughters live in a world that has some of the beauty and wonder of the world I grew up in. I hope the actions of a few will not mean destruction and suffering for everyone else. I hope for a world with a greater sense of equity in how we use our resources; a world that is defined by the need to contend with the mess that we are leaving for our children."

That would seem to be a reasonable ask, but the scientific

consensus is that humanity has only until 2030 to stave off the worst effects of climate change. And the message from the recent UN Climate Action Summit is that we're going to have to fight for an equitable and sustainable world.

Kelsey's childhood was surrounded by talk of climate change. Her father, elected to Congress when she was just five years old, sponsored the first Congressional hearings on global warming. "We spent a lot of time at home talking about what was happening in the world, and thinking about how to solve problems. We had climate scientists in and out of our kitchen on a fairly regular basis. It was all about the science, though, and it wasn't something I connected to."

“MOMS ARE POWERFUL. MOMS CAN BE FEARLESS, AND MOMS ARE DETERMINED. THEY GET STUFF DONE.”

This perception—that climate change was somehow abstract and academic—changed only years later, when Kelsey had become a mother. She describes it as a lightning-bolt moment.

"After a day at the aquarium, I was reading a story about coral reefs to my then four-year-old daughter.

"Suddenly I realized: I am showing my daughter something she is never going to see.

"What are all the other things I will be showing her, or talking about, that simply won't exist, or will exist in a completely different form because of the impact of the climate crisis? Coral reefs are just the canary in the coal mine.

"It was the first time I experienced the climate crisis through the eyes of a mom."

Through this lens, the familiar subject came brutally alive. "When you become a mother, you think about everything in terms of how it will affect your child. You think: How old will my child be when these terrible things happen? How will her life be influenced?

"It's a parent's job to protect their children, and you're faced with the reality that you cannot protect them from something as enormous as the climate crisis."

ABOUT KELSEY

A 2001 **Henry Crown Fellow** of the Aspen Global Leadership Network.

Chair of Mothers Out Front, which she co-founded in 2013.

Graduated with an MBA from Stanford University.

Co-founded Align Technology, maker of Invisalign, in 1997, and took it public within four years as President.

A mother of two daughters.

Winner of the 2019 John P. McNulty Prize.

Between her childhood home and this moment, Kelsey already had what most would consider a full list of accomplishments. She had obtained an MBA at Stanford University—"I thought it would be a useful skill-set"—after which she co-founded a successful start-up, Align Technology, with a classmate. Align is the maker of Invisalign, a clear plastic orthodontic alternative to metal and wire braces. It currently employs more than 13,000 people and has annual net revenues of \$2.2 billion.

However, the executive life was not compatible with being the person and mother she wanted to be, so Kelsey exited after four years, having taken the company public. She thus found herself in the fortunate position of being able to start again.

In the same year as the public offering, Kelsey became a Henry Crown Fellow at the Aspen Institute. One of the Fellowship's greatest gifts, she says, is its focus on what it means to live "a good life." "It requires you to think about your place in society, and your place in the world. What is the role you want to play?"

"I had always wanted to make the world a better place. But I hadn't known what to do or how to do it." When she had her "aha" moment about coral reefs, Kelsey found her clear and urgent purpose.

In the grief, despair and anger that flowed from that awakening, her instinct was to seek others who felt the same—not because she had a plan, but out of a desire, she says, to not be alone with her feelings.

Around this time she encountered the work of veteran community organizer Marshall Ganz, a professor at the Harvard Kennedy School, who famously used community organizing techniques in support of Barack Obama's presidential campaign. The two met and clicked, and together started to convene some gatherings around climate change. And soon after that, at a climate vigil, Kelsey met Vanessa Rule, herself a mother and climate activist who immediately bought into Kelsey's thinking. It was a fortuitous meeting, says Kelsey. "I'm definitely not a solo operator."

And so Mothers Out Front was born, by Kelsey's admission, of hearts rather than heads; out of a desire to connect with mothers from across society, to become a justice-centered force to combat climate change. The name, Kelsey says, "comes from my experience walking down the street holding the hand of my daughter and thinking: If a car was driving down the street and my daughter ran into the street, I would throw myself in front of her, between her and the car.

"Mothers put themselves out front. That fierce determination to protect, and that deep love, is really the driving force of the work that we do."

The two founders launched the movement with a series of house parties. "We facilitated 23 house parties in the Boston area. With Marshall's guidance and coaching, we developed a whole presentation. At each new party, we iterated it; and at every house party, we asked people if they would be willing to host another party."

Kelsey's instinct that many shared her fierce feelings was correct: Mothers Out Front soon gained traction. She attributes this to their approach of "chunking" the challenge. "When you're faced with a problem as big as climate change it's easy to feel helpless," she

ABOUT MOTHERS OUT FRONT

- Mothers Out Front is a **mom-led grassroots movement**, whose community-based teams of mothers and families campaign for **climate justice**.
- Using an organizing framework modelled on social movements in US history, Mothers Out Front **builds people power**. It provides **the structure, coaching, training and tools members need to win campaigns** at the local, state and regional levels.
- **Wins include halting fossil fuel infrastructure** in New York and Virginia, **eliminating dangerous gas leaks** in Massachusetts, and **increasing renewable energy use** in cities across the country.
- What started with a handful of volunteers **has grown into more than 32,000 supporters**, with 2,000+ active volunteer leaders working through 45+ community-based teams in 10 states, and growing.
- Winner of the 2019 UN Global Climate Action Award.

says. "It's too big. People feel very disempowered in a system where you have powerful interests like the fossil fuel industry profiting in unprecedented ways, at the cost of the health of our entire planet, and our children. So, it's very easy to go to that place of despair, that feeling of helplessness.

"Mothers Out Front gives people a sense of agency. We do talk starkly about what we're up against. But we move on to how it makes us feel as mothers, what our concerns are. The movement shows people that they have power through coming together and working collectively, in the tradition of the great social movements in American history, and around the world."

At this stage, Kelsey argues, the climate crisis is about power. "Yes, more information is always useful. More technology is always useful. But fundamentally, the problem is that there's too much power in the hands of a very few."

What the environmental community has been most missing, she argues, is a different kind of power: a well-organized, broad-based constituency pushing leaders to act. Mothers Out Front builds power from the bottom up, using the "snowflake" model: forming local teams, engaging people in meaningful ways, and following the energy in the community in determining local priorities. A signature strength is empowering members with little or no prior experience of advocacy, to tell their story in ways that get through to decision-makers, and supporting their growth over time into leaders.

The organization is not exclusive to women or mothers—but mothers, Kelsey argues, are particularly driven. "We don't believe we have a



monopoly in caring for our children; we know that fathers and others care deeply. But we do believe that mothers are wired to protect.

“Women tend to be leaders in their communities. When it comes to who’s on the Parent Teacher Associations, who’s running the church groups, who’s running the community bake sales, who’s showing up at town council meetings, time and again you will see that women take the lead on that. So we have incredible networks.”

Mothers Out Front, says Kelsey, brings together everything in her life, from her family upbringing, through the business skills and learnings she gained about agile experimentation from starting up and scaling Align Technologies, and through her Henry Crown Fellowship.

Through her Henry Crown venture in the early 2000s, she had chaired the board of the newly-independent Environmental Working Group, where, she says, she learned to maneuver the challenges inherent in running “a scrappy non-profit”. It was the beginning of a series of experiences and roles that, after becoming a mother, led to the founding of Mothers Out Front.

**“ WHEN PEOPLE COME TOGETHER
FROM DIFFERENT BACKGROUNDS,
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ARE MUCH STRONGER. ”**

Mothers Out Front has seen extraordinary momentum coinciding with growing awareness and concern about the climate crisis. Currently, it has more than 32,000 supporters, with over 2,000 active volunteer leaders. There are over 45 community-based teams across 10 US states, and they are growing across the country with an annual operating budget of over \$4 million dollars. Successes range from new state regulations in California and Massachusetts; helping to delay or stop fracked gas projects in New York, Virginia and Massachusetts; securing an increase in the uptake of renewables in dozens of municipalities; and driving cities and towns to ban “natural” gas in new residential

and commercial construction. Creative tactics used included a birthday party for Boston’s oldest gas leak, and twitter-storms targeting the responsible utilities.

Looking ahead, a key challenge lies in creating the multiracial and authentically cross-class movement needed in order to be a force for transformative change. Kelsey describes the movement as being about justice for, amongst others, the frontline communities that are hit hardest by the health, environmental and economic costs of climate change. Mostly, these are low-income communities, indigenous communities and communities of color—communities in areas that have historically been zoned for industrial activity, where new oil and gas infrastructure is disproportionately routed through, or where polluted water and air is concentrated without the political or financial capital to fight back.

It is core to Mothers Out Front’s mission to center these communities in their advocacy and ensure that their voice and leadership are a key part of the movement for bold action on climate.

“When people come together from different backgrounds, you end up with solutions that are much stronger than you ever would have had alone. But it’s taken me some time to really understand that, because of the role of structural racism in driving injustices in the US, building a multiracial movement is only realized by incorporating anti-racism into our work. We need everyone to be part of this growing movement if we’re going to win,” says Kelsey.

Lasting change is evident in members’ personal transformation: “the relationships they form and the agency they develop stays with them, I think, for the rest of their lives.”

Ultimately, for Kelsey, success is about measurably shifting the trajectory. Being able to say: “I did everything I could,” is not enough: she wants to be able to declare that “we brought a force for change to the climate movement”.

Mothers Out Front will not stop until they have achieved that, for the generations to come. “When we feel tired and we want to quit, we look at our children and feel ever greater resolve.”

THE CLIMATE CONTEXT

Scientists estimate we have until 2030 to avoid the most devastating impacts of climate change.

The US has produced 25% of all historical emissions

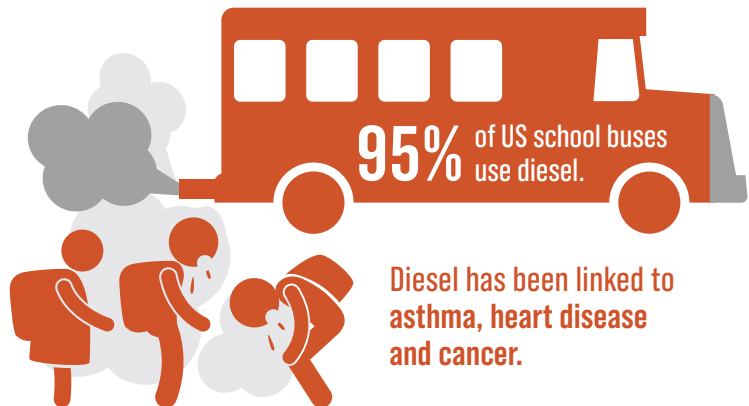


The US oil and gas industry leaks 13 million metric tons of methane each year.



Methane accounts for 10% of US emissions.

Young people are most vulnerable to pollutants while their nervous, immune and reproductive systems develop.



Diesel has been linked to asthma, heart disease and cancer.

Sources: UN, Outworlddata.org, U.S. Energy Information Administration, Science Magazine, EPA, UNFCCC, U.S. PIRG Education Fund

IN HER OWN WORDS: WHAT KELSEY HAS LEARNED

The path isn't always clear until later.

Many experiences coalesced over time that evolved into Mothers Out Front, from collaborating with mothers who shared the same concerns, to finding Marshall Ganz who had the tools to organize a movement.

When faced with intractable problems, try "chunking" the challenge.

With a problem as big as climate change, it's easy to feel helpless. It's too big. It's too overwhelming. It's too systemic. We talk starkly about what we're up against, but we move on to how it makes us feel and where we can make an impact.

People don't act unless they have agency.

The climate movement needs a well-organized, broad-based constituency demanding that leaders act. We use the 'snowflake' model: forming local teams, engaging people in meaningful ways, and following the energy in the community to determine local priorities.

America's history of structural racism is its own challenge.

The reality of building a multiracial, authentically cross-class organization is far greater than I would ever have anticipated.