

“No sir! Not on my watch!”

The Pledge Season 2 - Episode 2

Kim: I've learned that rage has a place in this world, and it's not always a bad thing. That you just get out there and you tell your truth and you stand firm.

Allison: This is *The Pledge*, a podcast profiling people who have pledged to engage in our Democracy. I'm Allison Daskal Hausman.

Sounds of Climate Protests

Allison: What about you? Do you participate in our democracy? Do you want to do more? It would be awesome if you could Tweet about your efforts with #pledge2020. Help spread the word that our democracy is strong.

Allison: This season, I'm bringing you stories from Virginia, and as a coastal state, it's already bearing the brunt of the climate crisis. They have stronger storms and frequent floods. And I have to say I felt it when I was there. I was driving across one of the many long bridges one evening in Hampton Roads. There was a furious storm. I saw several bolts of lightning flash in the sky, all at the same time. I'd never seen anything like it. My little rent-a-car was fighting against the wind, and I thought, "This isn't even close to a hurricane."

People in Southern Virginia experience this kind of thing often. Cale Jaffe, a professor at the University of Virginia Law School who specializes in environmental law, sums it up.

Cale: Folks who live in Norfolk who see streets flooding with almost every high tide, and you're seeing that sort of flooding over and over again, all of a sudden people are realizing, "Oh wow, this is really here."

Allison: That's certainly true of Kim Sudderth. She lives in Norfolk, and she's working to confront the climate crisis.

Kim: It is going to take all of us to fix it. And we can't afford to leave anyone out of this discussion.

Allison: I meet her at her home in a quiet neighborhood in the Hampton Roads area of Virginia.

Kim: But drink your tea.

Allison: The tea is delicious.

Kim: Do you like it? Ok, I'll put lemon in it.

Allison: I just, I love this tea and I don't know why we don't drink it up north. You know?

Allison: Kim has lived in the area for her whole life. It's an area steeped in history. English colonists first arrived in Jamestown in 1607, and the first enslaved Africans were brought ashore in Hampton Roads, in 1619. I was actually there on the 400th anniversary. Kim's family lived in Hampton Roads because her Dad was stationed there in the Navy.

Kim: So my little slice of heaven. Hampton Roads is, you know, it's transient because we have the military here, so there's always someone new. And then you have the locals, the mainstays, and, you know, we're here to stay. We're not going anywhere.

Allison: Kim's a mainstay. She's going to be there come hell or high water--which is exactly what they're used to facing.

Kim: Hurricanes are just, you know, it's a fact of life. You know, around early September, we go back to school the day after Labor Day, and then a few weeks later, there's a hurricane, so you get another week off. And I thought hurricanes were awesome, you know, because I get an extra week off of school.

Allison: But Kim grew up and became a mother. And the hurricanes got stronger.

Kim: I got really scared because now I've got three kids, an infant, and here's the thing I can't do anything about. I can't make it stay in the ocean, I can't make it turn course, I can't make it not be as strong.

Allison: What Kim finds even scarier than the hurricanes is what happens to her community when they hit. After Hurricane Isabel in 2003, she was cooking for all of her friends

because she was one of the few who didn't lose power. She went to the grocery store to pick up some hot dog buns.

Kim: And it was like the Walking Dead. People were just everywhere. And they were parking everywhere, and they were getting in arguments. And so I'm just like, I got into that same rhythm. I started just grabbing stuff too.

Allison: You might be able to tell already, this kind of attitude just doesn't sound like Kim. She's positive, good natured, and loves to laugh.

Kim: And then I found that there were two packs of hotdog buns left, just two. I'm like, "Phew." I grabbed them, and I put them in my cart, and I felt like mission accomplished cause that's what I went for.

Allison: But then she decided to get some ice cream

Kim: And when I turned my back to open the door, put the ice cream in the cart, my hot dog buns are gone. I'm like, the heck! So now I'm on this manhunt for my hot dog buns, that I hadn't purchased yet. And I get in line, I'm completely frustrated and the person in front of me, I'm not certain those were the ones that were in my cart, but they looked a lot like the ones on my cart. And I really had to talk myself out of snatching them up and saying, no, those aren't yours, they're mine.

Allison: Later, Kim reflected on what had happened.

Kim: And I'm thinking, look at what that did to us. As people, as this beautiful community I just told you about, that we went to grabbing stuff out of each other's carts and not looking each other in the eye.

Allison: I can certainly imagine that fear and insecurity in that kind of situation, could bring out parts of us that are not so generous.

Kim: So, it was certainly not as bad as Katrina, and it certainly wasn't as bad as Houston. But what I saw was a future that scared the crap out of me.

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Kim: Four years ago, I was on a couch anesthetizing myself with wine and TV, and doing absolutely nothing. Just frozen, paralyzed.

Allison: Her husband was never home. Her kids were getting older, and she was losing interest in her job doing data entry at the Veterans Administration. Kim remembers that the paralysis lasted a long time. But gradually she started to get her life together, in part because of a health scare, but mostly because she knew she had to make a change.

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Allison: Kim left her husband. Then, she saw this job posted on Indeed for an organizer for Mothers Out Front--an organization she soon learned was a national nonprofit working to raise awareness about climate change and made up mostly of volunteers who are moms. She didn't even know what an Organizer was, but she was curious, so she clicked on the ad. She credits Mothers Out Front for purposefully eliminating barriers because they didn't have specific requirements for education or job experience on the listing. They just listed the skills. And Kim knew from her previous experience that she could coordinate volunteers and events. and she knew that she cared about the climate. So she applied. It was the next step in transforming her life.

Kim: My job is to reveal to these mothers the skills and talent that they've always had. It's just a matter of saying, hey, you can do it. And, you know, I can help.

Allison: The work is deeply rewarding. She describes the wide range of women she works with: from a resident in the local public housing community to a rocket scientist at NASA. She goes to every event that has to do with the climate crisis. And she ends up talking to everyone. She beams when she tells me about the women getting bolder and bolder.

Kim: Oh, I love getting a text message saying, "Have you seen this crap? We need to blah, blah, blah." And I get chills right now where they're just like on fire, where last year they didn't speak above a whisper, but now they're shooting off an email to their mayor, like, "No, sir. Not on my watch."

Allison: Kim's role as an organizer is crucial. The challenges are daunting and often the people hardest hit have the fewest resources to fight back.

Kim: Climate change doesn't care about who you are or what you look like, or how you identify, but we also know that communities that are black and brown and poor, isolated, elderly, disabled. Those are going to be the communities and people who are

going to be affected worse and first. So, why shouldn't they be at the front of the line, telling their truth.

Allison: Kim works with the moms in her groups to do just that. Like fighting Dominion Energy when they were planning for the Atlantic Coast Pipeline to go right through their county.

Kim: They felt like that was worth the fight, but they also felt like they weren't really prepared to take that on.

Allison: But Kim knew they could do it.

Kim: We did a training, a public narrative training. We did a lot of research.

Allison: Then they spoke out at a city council meeting.

Council Speaker 1: An accident during operations leaks not only gas, but also unknown amounts of associated hydraulic fluids into our water.

Council Speaker 2: So I really believe that we will all feel pretty silly, ten years from now, if we allow this pipeline and in ten years its obsolete, and a stranded asset, and very expensive.

Council Speaker 3: So I ask you for myself, for my community, and for my little girl, please protect our water supply and vote no to this bid, thank you.

Kim: And they killed it. Oh my gosh, it was wonderful.

Allison: The bad news is that they are building the pipeline anyway. But the women got stronger. Two of the women were asked by the mayor to join the Climate Change Commission.

Kim: Now they're like hanging out with the mayor and city council making decisions.

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Allison: The people I talked to in Virginia know that if we are going to address the climate crisis, we are going to have to do it together.

Kim: Climate change is not checking to see if you're registered Democrat or Republican. It's coming.

Cindy: We're not going to solve climate change unless it's bipartisan.

Allison: Cindy Burbank is a lifelong Republican who lives in Warrenton. With a population of about 7000, she says it's often characterized as horse country, full of farms, wineries and working people. We meet in the library in Charlottesville. Cindy recently retired from a career in the federal government working as an economist in transportation. She's on a mission, with many other conservatives, to get Republicans back into finding solutions.

Cindy: In this country, we've got to overcome the polarization. We've got to have Republican support and that's building, that's happening.

Allison: Cindy now devotes her time to working for the Citizens Climate Lobby, or CCL.

Cindy: An international, nonprofit, nonpartisan, grassroots organization. I belong to the conservative caucus of CCL. So we especially focus on bringing more conservatives and Republicans on board. Our central focus is talking to members of Congress and building the political will for what we think is the most effective solution, which is pricing carbon.

Allison: Cindy explains what this entails.

Cindy: Put a price on carbon. So that it's a tax way upstream, a fee way upstream on coal, natural gas, petroleum, the major sources of greenhouse gases. And as that tax, that fee, is levied and percolates through our economy, it sends a signal to everyone to begin to shift their behavior and how they use energy.

Allison: Then use that money from the taxes to give American households a dividend. Cindy has a bold vision for the Virginia congressional delegation to lead the country and come together around this carbon tax solution.

Cindy: Just like the founders of our country who were from Virginia, you could really make a difference by coming together as an entire congressional delegation and supporting that. It could be the tipping point.

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Allison: At the same time the work of bringing people together is making a difference in Virginia and could also lead the country, Kim marvels at how it makes a difference in her daily life. For one thing, she's learned a LOT about energy.

Kim: I've learned about pipelines, and wind turbines, and offshore drilling. And the thing is, you know, I'm not an expert on any of it. I know just enough to be dangerous.

Allison: And she's learned a lot about the power and inspiration that comes from people finding the courage to speak out.

Kim: I've learned that with a little bit of coaching and a little bit of encouragement, people can do some pretty amazing things. And I learned about myself, how good that feels to watch someone else spread their wings and take flight. I've learned that rage has a place in this world, and it's not always a bad thing. That you get out there and you speak your piece, and it doesn't have to be the King's English, and it doesn't have to be well orchestrated. You just get out there and you tell your truth, and you stand firm.

Allison: Kim's story shows how energizing and fortifying it can be to confront these issues that can feel so big, they can paralyze you. She's not paralyzed anymore.

Allison: And what about you? Are you paralyzed or are you fighting? It's not easy to get involved but making a Pledge can help motivate you to get out there. So share your pledge. Tweet about it with #pledge2020. Let's get hundreds--dare I say thousands?--out there.

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Allison: In my next episode, you'll meet two Virginians confronting another big issue--the implications of power and money threatening our democracy. We look at the Koch Brothers and their relationship to George Mason University

Bethany: They've done an amazing job. It's amazing what money can buy you. It's amazing the kind of power and influence that your billions of dollars can buy.

Allison: Don't miss learning about what's happening there and the courage it takes to confront it.

Allison: Thanks so much to Kim Sudderth, and her commitment to fight for environmental justice and solving the climate crisis. Thanks also to Cindy Burbank and Cale Jaffe for sharing their perspectives. For more information about Mothers Out Front and Citizens Climate Lobby, go to my website, thepledgepodcast.com, and look at the show notes and transcript. You'll find links to lots of resources and ways to get involved.

Thanks also to Sound designer Tina Tobey Mack.

Again, don't forget to tweet you Pledge. And share this episode with a friend!

Until next time, stay strong and stick with your pledge.

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