

Speech of Sofia Menemenlis\*, delivered as the Opening Address on  
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Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Sofia Menemenlis and I'm a junior at La Cañada High School and a Fellow with the Alliance for Climate Education.

I'm sixteen years old, and there are a couple things that define my generation. The first is that we spend way too much time on our phones. The second is that the Earth we will inhabit during our lifetimes is different from the Earth any other generation of humans has lived on. The effects of climate change are being felt around the world and here in LA.

More extremely hot days will mean more kids playing soccer in triple-digit temperatures.

Many people I know, including my brother, have asthma. Health conditions like asthma made worse by the fact that where most LA residents live, air quality does not meet public health standards.

I've seen many of my favorite hiking spots dry up, and as the drought continues, our supplies of food, water, and electricity will be strained.

Wildfires, like the Station Fire a few years ago that forced my family and many of my friends' families to evacuate our homes, will become more frequent.

A lot of the things that are already wrong with our society will be made worse by climate change. Less affluent areas that contributed the least to climate change in the first place, will be the worst equipped to deal with it.

If people keep waiting and waiting to take decisive action on climate change, the situation we will face as adults could be beyond repair. But you already know that.

It shocks me to see how sure experts are that a fast response to climate change is necessary, yet how reluctant some of our country's leaders are to take any action. Right now, we need politicians to listen to scientists, to enact strong policy to combat climate change, and to help communities prepare for its effects. We need business leaders to focus on long-term sustainability, not just short-term profit. And we need youth involved as well.

As young people, we've been saddled with problems that we neither created nor asked for. My parents' generation may have seen something to gain from putting fossil fuels in our atmosphere, but my generation has everything to lose.

This kind of sucks, but my hope lies in the determination of my peers to make a difference. At my school, *students* are working to make change. Our environmental club has worked to cut energy usage by asking teachers to shut down appliances over school breaks. We've coordinated recycling, removed an appalling amount of trash from the Santa Monica beaches, and worked with a solar installer to educate our community about renewable energy. Right now, we're working with our school board to replace styrofoam food containers with a more environmentally friendly alternative. As an ACE Fellow, I work with City Plants to distribute fruit trees to community members in low-canopy areas. In fact, we are giving away 100 free trees this Sunday at the Mar Vista Farmer's Market.

My peers have shown that they know what's at stake in our future, and have the passion and energy to make some important changes. My generation must be at the forefront of the movement against climate change. Whether we created it or not, we will be affected by it and it is our problem to solve.

Although we want to make our voices heard, young people tend to see policymaking as something that happens between people we can't relate to. This doesn't have to be the case. In August, some of my peers and I attended an event at LA City Hall to have a dialogue about LA's sustainability plan with city officials. Members of the mayor's office listened to our ideas, and involved us in the process of building a sustainable future. More communication of this kind needs to happen, especially because young people make up 20% of California's population. Also, in case anyone has forgotten, young people will someday be slightly older people; people who are dealing with the consequences of climate change and leading the effort against it.

So in order to maintain a world that looks a lot like the one humans have inhabited for the past thousands of years, we need adults to involve young people in making the policies that will determine our future. My generation is not lazy. We can solve this crisis, and I believe that we will. And when we do, we will probably still be on our phones all the time. But we will be on our phones tweeting about how crazy it would have been if we had just sat back and done nothing.