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An interview with Hannah McCaffrey, Harris Hall's very own Eco-Rep

"So many people today behave like they live on their own little island, the truth is, there are no islands, and we all share the same space." Concern about the use and protection of this `space' is nothing new for Hannah McCaffrey. It's been many years since she first became interested in the environmental efforts of her Church summer camp. This summer camp, along with the encouragement of director Pammy Foxly, is what would eventually shape Hannah's desire to change the environment.

During the summer before her junior year, after learning the ropes, Hannah took over the environmental program at the Church summer camp she had been attending for years. Here, she worked on a sustainability program and taught younger children about the importance of protecting the environment. When new directors took over the camp, Hannah was given the freedom to experiment with her ideas and things quickly began to change. Recycling programs were set up around camp, cooking water was saved for dishwashing, and biodiesel replaced gas in the maintenance vehicles. It was simple modifications such as this that made Hannah realize just a little could go a long way.

Hannah still considers the things she learned at the camp her "inspiration to make a difference". Another inspiration for her environmental activism is former Vice President Al Gore. She believes Gore's method of `shocking' people into understanding the problems we face on our globe is one of the most effective. "There are too many people that think they can drive their huge SUVs everywhere, Al Gore has been successful at making more and more people realize that the environmental issue is their problem too." Hannah says. Thinking back to her roots, Hannah starts talking about Pammy Foxly once more. Clearly, she is the flame behind the fire that first started Hannah's continuing journey of environmental activism. Foxly taught Hannah how to best get people to listen, even the ones that don't want to. This ideology is how she continues to deal with those who don't support her activism or those who continue to be ignorant to the growing devastation of the environment.

"You have to start by giving them something they can handle, something easy, that won't create a drastic change in their lifestyle." This, she says, is the key to convincing even the biggest skeptics that everything we do makes a difference. Hannah understands that not everyone is as eager as she is to prevent climate change, or to save our dwindling resources. So instead of asking them to stop driving their cars or to decorate their rooftops with solar panels, Hannah knows its simple things like starting a compost bin or shutting off the lights every time they leave that will be truly effective. Clearly this isn't asking too much, and is something that even the most callous of us all can handle. Though they may seem like meager steps, a lot of people doing just a little is what the globe really needs.

When Hannah speaks with those have opposing political views from her, she applies a similar philosophy. "You have to hit home", she says, "You have to speak to them from their point of view and give them issues that they care about." These days 'they' usually means the republicans who have yet to understand (or continue to ignore) the damage to our environment and the wealthy million-dollar homeowners who can't get enough of their gas guzzling SUV's. Hannah believes that talking to these people from an economic stand point really gets them to listen. "If you tell them by buying a hybrid car they'll be saving lots of money on gas, or if by insulating their windows properly rather than building a cheap house they'll have a much less devastating heating bill, than they begin to take you seriously and really listen to what you have to say." She tells me. I get the impression that Hannah is good at connecting with others, at seeing their point of view, and of convincing them to see hers. Though she is good at what she does, undoubtedly Hannah continues to find people that just plain and simple won't listen. She finds is most discouraging when she talks to people about important issues, and they are loud about the fact that they don't care or they take the 'it's not my problem' attitude. Hannah knows she could never convince everyone to see things as she does, and for this reason she does her best not to let the negative people get to her. When she feels as if no one cares, Hannah turns to the incredible support system she has around her to lift her spirits. Her mom, in particular, she says, has always encouraged her to follow her dreams and is always there to motivate when she's feeling down. With so much support and encouragement around her, Hannah hasn't found it hard to continue her environmental work here at UVM.

At UVM, Hannah is the official 'Eco-Rep' for the Harris dormitory on Athletic Campus. This program first caught her eye at the new student fair when freshmen arrived at campus earlier this fall. Though Hannah intends to continue on to much more serious environmental work, right now being an Eco-Rep is suiting her just fine. "I get paid to do what I love and be surrounded by people who love the same thing as me, how much better could it be?" she asks me. Weekly, Hannah is responsible for posting bulletin boards around the Harris halls informing students about the environment or ways they can get involved as well as showing a movie she has picked out. Recently, Hannah and the Millis hall Eco-Rep did a trash sort of the entire buildings waste. It seemed to be a long, tedious task but Hannah tells me how successful it was. The success of course, makes the labor all the more easy. Earlier in the semester Hannah also went door to door through the hallways offering a light bulb swap to students. Hannah handed out environmentally-friendly and more energy efficient lights in exchange for the ones students had lining their rooms. It is clear that Hannah is doing her part to make this a more environmentally-friendly campus for us all.

Loving the work she does, Hannah is very encouraging of other young people to get involved in environmental activism. She thinks it is important that young people get involved in anything they can, no matter how small it is. "In any environmental club, you will meet people who want to help. Make connections. That's the most important thing any aspiring environmental activist can do." Clearly, Hannah is already busy making her connections. It is remarkable how optimistic she is about changing our environment, with such constant negativity surrounding the issue I find it reassuring that there are people such as Hannah McCaffrey who aren't letting it prevent them from making a difference. Hannah is evidently a girl who knows what she wants in life; her ambitions to save the environment will certainly take her far and no doubt bring her success. Success for Hannah however, is success for us all. "The best thing we can do," she says "Is to be hopeful, to continue to be positive about the change that young people like us can bring to the world."