

## Ralph Nader Radio Hour Ep 378 Transcript

**Steve Skrovan:** Welcome to the *Ralph Nader Rader Hour*. My name is Steve Skrovan along with my co-host, David Feldman. Hello there, David.

**David Feldman:** Good morning, Steve.

**Steve Skrovan:** And the man of the hour, Ralph Nader, is with us. Hello, Ralph.

**Ralph Nader:** Hello, everybody.

**Steve Skrovan:** We have, you know, we say this every week, we have a great show. But we really do have a great show this week, especially. We're tough on corporate crime here as many of you know. And that means we spend a lot of time calling out how corporations use their financial resources to bend the world to fit their bottom line. A lot of companies spend a lot of time and a lot of money to keep the government from regulating their actions and to keep consumers from knowing the truth about said actions. But what does it look like when a company does not do that--when they invest their time, effort and money into building a sustainable business with fair labor practices, a positive environmental impact and equitable social presence?

Our first guest, Gero Leson, helped the soap manufacturing company, Dr. Bronner's, do exactly that. We'll ask him about his new book, *Honor Thy Label*. In it, he details the Dr. Bronner's mission, his work, building their fair trade supply chain and how companies can scale up their operations without sacrificing their integrity.

Our second guest will be political organizer, advocate, educator and high school junior, Calla Walsh. She is a leader of the new progressive movement, the Markeyverse, that has electrified the Massachusetts Democratic Party. They've been credited with securing [US] Senator Ed Markey's primary win over Joseph P. Kennedy III last fall and have moved on to supporting progressive candidates and races farther down the ticket. From TikTok memes to campaign finance spreadsheets, from hashtags to op-eds, Ms. Walsh and the rest of the Markeyverse have used their social media prowess and critical view of the political establishment to mobilize their network of passionate progressives. We'll be asking Calla Walsh about the work she's doing in Massachusetts and where the movement goes from here.

Then if we have time, Ralph will answer some more of your listener questions. And as always, we'll check in with our corporate crime reporter Russell Mokhiber. But first, if a corporation is a person, how can that person also be a responsible citizen, David?

**David Feldman:** Gero Leson is vice president of special operations at Dr. Bronner's. Since 2005, he has been responsible for Dr. Bronner's sourcing of major ingredients from certified fair trade and organic projects. Welcome to the *Ralph Nader Rader Hour*, Gero Leson.

**Gero Leson:** Thanks, David and Steve for having me on the show. It's an honor.

**Ralph Nader:** Thank you indeed, Gero. I'm sure a good many of our listeners know about Dr. Bronner's company. They've used their soaps and other products over the years, but I don't think they know about the corporate philosophy, the corporate practices that are marching arm-in-arm with companies like Patagonia [Inc.] and Interface [Inc.] corporation, that we've talked about on the program in the past. So this book has been published by one of the biggest publishers in the world, Penguin [Books]. So obviously they saw some promise in the kind of message that this book has and how exciting it is in many directions—workers, the environment, the kind of supply chain with third-world country farmers, fair trade, et cetera. So why don't you describe what this company is all about before we get into the detail.

**Gero Leson:** I'll try to keep it to less than two hours, Ralph. But it's a very long story, and some of the listeners have heard pieces of it. To make it really short, the company was founded by an eccentric German Jewish soap maker whose parents had been killed by the Nazis during the Holocaust. His intention was to overcome the boundaries between nations, races, religions and just devoted the rest of his life to saving planet earth, but, and that's the trick, he was a soap maker after all. And he was a good marketeer, I believe. So what he did is he just took the recipe of the soap that his parents' company used to make, the liquid soap that many of you know. He took that recipe to the United States and then started selling it in the Los Angeles of the 50s and 60s. Always peppermint flavor; that was the soap product for a long time. And then he just went out on his soapbox, so to speak, no pun intended, and gave speeches to a growing audience of activists that was counterculture. And that gave him somewhat of a notoriety, which lasted into the 90s. So it's the concept behind it, and he lived it. The concept was that a small company that's committed can make a difference. And how did he do this? Initially, the first decades, it was mostly just being very nice with his staff and then giving a lot of speeches and just producing simple, effective products. That's really where it started. It was the next generation, his son, Jim [Bronner], and his daughter-in-law, Trudy, who in the 90s then put that whole concept on more solid footing. And that included, for instance, setting up a healthcare program for their staff that's unmatched. I sure know there's no such good health insurance, I believe, anywhere in the United States; no deductible healthcare that gives us a free choice. There's benefits that we have that even large companies usually don't supply. And there is an atmosphere in the company, that's really happened over the last 30 years, I would say, where there is this sense that the company pursues a goal beyond just making money.

Now that sounds too good to be true. And I've had the privilege to work closely with the family since 2005, but worked with them as a consultant before. And the question is, how can you even do this? And it's not that difficult. The company is rather profitable because we're very efficient in many respects, but the profit is not distributed to the owners. It's family-held, right? We have no outside investors. The profit is not distributed to owners as a dividend nor is it paid out in the form of very high executive salaries. We have a salary cap in place 5 to 1!

**Ralph Nader:** 5 to 1, you say. Well, it's 350 to 400 to 1 in big business.

**Gero Leson:** We're a little lower than that. And that's really where the source of the money is. And what are we doing with the money? The simple number to remember is we spend some 7% of revenues--of all revenues, not of profit--on activism and on philanthropy. That's a pretty broad package and there's a whole list of things I could go down, and most of them do not have much to do with soap. But they do have to do with making societal change, whether it's rehabilitation of prison inmates, whether it's animal welfare, whether it's the legalization of the use of psychedelics for psychotherapy, whether it's about increasing the minimum wage. Those are just a few examples of the kind of projects we support as if it was part of our business. And I think that's important.

**Ralph Nader:** The one figure, listeners, that really stunned me—you know, most companies, if they give 1% of their pre-tax profits, which is deductible, to charity, they brag about it. If they give 3%, they boast about it big time. What you say in this book, *Honor Thy Label: Dr. Bronner's Unconventional Journey to a Clean, Green, and Ethical Supply Chain*, is that you give 47% to charitable and educational, environmental, safety, health projects outside your company. Is that accurate?

**Gero Leson:** It is accurate. And the number that goes with it again is 7% out of revenues, which even our friends at Patagonia, I think they do around 1%. 7% is massive. And that doesn't even include, Ralph, it does not include the costs, for instance, that we spend—the money we spend on higher salaries. It does not include the higher prices we pay for the raw materials that we produce in all foreign partner companies. That's the work I do. So those are just considered cost of production. Those 47% out of profit or the 7% out of revenues are just extracurricular activities. That is really rather unusual that we do that. And we do that not just with, you know, we don't just roll out the money. We focus very much on what we do. We're very strategic about the partners we pick in philanthropy. And that's just like how we run the business too, which is very efficient in many respects.

**Ralph Nader:** And the details are on the website where people can follow up what kind of projects, where, who, when. What is your website?

**Gero Leson:** It's drbronner.com. It just gives an overview of the principles we follow. And then we have the *All-One! Reports*, our annual report on spending on activity. So these two combined give a very good overview. And then in my book, I also described some of the pillars of our activism and charity. I'd say drbronner.com will be a good starting point.

**Ralph Nader:** That's B-R-O-N-N-E-R, drbronner.com. In the description of the book on the jacket, it says, "In *Honor Thy Label*, Dr. Bronner's head of Special Operations, Gero Leson, reveals the inside story of how a little-known family-run soap company grew from countercultural roots to create a revolutionary fair trade and organic supply chain from the ground up—and rode the waves of popular demand without losing sight of the process. Through stories of harrowing setbacks and hard-won triumphs in projects that spanned the globe, in Sri Lanka, Ghana, India, and beyond, Leson demystifies the process of building and scaling ethical production. And he proves that if done right, the results ripple outward to benefit customers,

communities, and the environment we share.” Let's take two areas into your supply chain, Sri Lanka and Palestine. Can you explain how you developed that and for what products?

**Gero Leson:** Yeah. The project in Sri Lanka was the first project we started and this was to produce organic and fair trade coconut oil for our soaps. And it came out of the desire that the Bronners developed in the early 2000s, when the third generation Mike [Bronner] and David Bronner, who now run the show with their mom, when they decided they had to look beyond just the operation in the United States. They needed to look at where the raw materials that are used for all-natural soaps, where they come from. Now those are mostly tropical oils; they're coconut oil, they're palm oil, olive oil, and then there's essential oil like mint oils—and then the thought was, we can't just call ourselves a responsible company without knowing how those materials are grown and processed, and that they hopefully have a beneficial impact on the ground.

So initially we switched to organic raw materials, realized that doesn't say anything about the social conditions on the ground. And then David Bronner said, “Gero, let's make organic and fair trade coconut oil.” I had worked in Sri Lanka on a development project and had partners on the ground. And since there was no commercially available, organic and fair trade coconut oil, we said, “Let's just build our own coconut oil mill.” [laughter] And we didn't know anything about doing this, but we had good partners and we were cocky enough to give it a try!

So what we had to do—and to make it clear, this company is a sister company of Dr. Bronner's, right? So we have a majority share in it and we had to develop first organic farming. So we've just recruited, I think we're now up to 1,200 local family coconut farmers, converted them to organic practices, and then we set up a factory that produces coconut oil, organic and fair trade. And that company has now some 300 employees all range from production through administration, 300 staff. [The] company is called Serendipol.

And then what you do as a fair trade project, you also get engaged in community development, that's funded by the fair trade premium. That's something that the customers, Dr Bronner's, and by now also other third-party customers pay. And that goes into a wide, wide range of projects that are supporting community development groups, for instance. And there's a focus on healthcare and education, notably schools in villages with low-income parents, for instance, usually bad schooling facilities, sometimes not toilets.

So those were the initial focuses and that's just grown and with a budget of some, I think, \$200,000 to \$250,000 a year. We've just been able to complete just a wide range of projects in collaboration with farmers as a fair trade committee. For those interested, there's a film we did on YouTube in 2015, it's called *Journey to Serendipol* and it gives a pretty good overview, impressive overview of the kind of projects that we have been doing.

So this became the model for all of our projects that are now supplying the vast majority of our raw materials. So it's engaging with farmers, converting them to organic, increased soil fertility through measures such as composting and mulching. So we take organic serious. We get involved ourselves, right? We hire the field officers, the agricultural field officers, that train the farmers. And then the same in production. It's based on fair wages, respect to your staff, opportunities for growth.

So those are the principles that any company should obey, right? We just do this under settings where usually this is not the case. In Sri Lanka, this is nowhere near the standard, right? There's usually not an awful lot of focus on team building, on personal development. So all of these concepts, we implemented in Sri Lanka then in Ghana, in Samoa and in India, in projects that are very close to us. Those are our companies or we are the largest customer.

And I think what we did is to just apply the Dr. Bronner's spirit, not conceptually. You know, each country is different. You have to look at your local setting when you apply such principles, but the spirit is just do business on fair terms, support the farmers and the workers and their communities and help them develop. And I think we've become pretty good at doing this. Initially, there were many challenges, but I think we're just getting better in finding out what needs to be done locally, what are the needs you need to respond to with the money you put in there, mostly by purchasing materials on fair terms.

**Ralph Nader:** Yeah. You've leveraged small loans and small grants, bypassing bureaucracies and all kinds of middle people draining away the contributions. What else besides soap does Dr. Bronner's company produce itself?

**Gero Leson:** So for now, it's the first food product that we launched eight years ago was the virgin food-grade coconut oil from Sri Lanka. We had too much too good coconut oil and we just launched it as food. And that became a huge success in the natural food sector. The chocolate now is the next product. And we essentially use those food products, Ralph, to I guess, demonstrate the fact that you can make fair and regenerative products from good ingredients. That's become our take. And I really like it. The chocolate tastes fantastic. I hope you get to try it out there.

**Ralph Nader:** My nephew, Tarek Milleron, has been working in the Western Amazon, in Peru, harvesting natural palm tree products, oils, and organizing workers to do that in the spirit that you've been talking about. If you want to go and see more what he's doing, it's Caura Futures. CAURA Futures. But on the other larger scale, how are you going to scale up this? Why aren't other companies—since you meet the bottom line, you make a profit, you treat your workers well, you pay your workers well, et cetera; you don't have the air and water as your private sewers. Why aren't these larger companies like [The] Procter & Gamble [Company] and others picking up on this? How do you scale it up so it's quantitatively significant?

**Gero Leson:** I get that question all the time. It's really tricky, and I'm not in the business of making excuses for large corporations. As an environmental consultant, I worked for quite a few of them and they have their own set of restrictions. Some of it is called shareholders, right? Most public companies really do not have the luxury we have. We are privately owned. And every morning, I thank whoever that we can make our own decisions because we don't need to watch what anonymous shareholders want. And so it's really difficult; even the most enlightened CEO has a very hard time doing what we do because it clashes with the concept of shareholder value. So that's one limitation. Then even if you have nonpublic large private companies, same thing. They often have foreign investors in there. And none of them is as radical as we are, where we just say, where the owners of the company say, "Look, I don't need another five expensive cars

or yacht; I'm just happy doing what we do. I have a decent salary. My house is nice, but we want to spend money elsewhere.”

So that attitude that the Bronner's family has is a little unusual. But on top of this, there is the challenge for large companies to do what we do in that they usually use a hundred times as much materials, right? Big chocolate makers, they go through much more in terms of cocoa beans than what we do. And what we do is we are on the ground and maybe many people don't get that. We don't just buy it from a project on the ground. We actually operate with local farmers. We operate those. I decide on what equipment to buy, to process cassava, for instance, or we decide jointly what kind of agricultural strategy we're going to pursue. And in that process, we develop teams and strengthened capacity, and that's difficult to do for big companies.

And honestly, many would like to do that, but as a big company, you have a bad reputation. Oftentimes you don't have the freedom we have on the ground, but ultimately, it comes down to the bottom line, the economics. But there is many big companies, as you know, they say by 2025, all of our beans are going to be sustainable. Well, that's really nice. And they say this because there's public pressure and consumers want that. If you look at the reality, those beans don't exist because they don't put the money where their mouth is. And it sounds trite, but it's not, Ralph. It's really the case that ultimately it comes down to keeping prices of the raw materials low, cocoa. Great example, you know last year, Ghana and Ivory Coast tried to be like OPEC [Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries] and tried try to impose a \$400 per ton premium, living income premium to the buyers. What did Cargill and the other guys do? They just bought all the beans they could get before that premium went into effect and had all their stocks full. Demand may have slipped a little bit this year, and Ghana and poor Ivory Coast, they're sitting on container loads that cannot be sold this year because all the warehouses are full. Ivory Coast has just done away with that premium; Ghana is sticking to it. But that's the game that's played. It's just global capitalism, people trying to get commodities at the lowest price while their customers, say that's the Nestlé's [S.A.] of the world. They say, “Yeah. We will have sustainable cocoa,” but their actions are not supporting this. And that's something we see all the time. It's really annoying.

**Ralph Nader:** It's clear that your company goes to a different level. I mean, regenerative agriculture is different from just organic agriculture and fair trade. Do you have contracts with your suppliers in these countries overseas that implement fair trade reciprocity?

**Gero Leson:** Well, its contracts is just only one element, but we're certified, right? So the operations undergo annual inspections. And so they check on just the whole range of things— fair prices being paid, support to farmers and agriculture, wages in processing, fair benefits, the fair trade premium I mentioned. So this is all part of the certification scope and having contracts with the suppliers is one part of it. And then to give you an idea of the premiums we pay, right now, the farm gate price [the price for the sale of farm produce direct from the producer] for cocoa in Ghana is around 1,800 bucks a metric ton. So Dr. Bronner's pays, in the form of premium and fees, directly to these projects, an additional 800 to 900, right? So we're paying 40% to 50% over the farm gate price they usually receive in Ghana and Ivory Coast. So just to give you an idea, we put the money where our mouth is. So money is part of it, but it's also

creating the structure and helping farmers to get to regenerative--to having a more productive farm because that's the only way they can ultimately make money.

**Ralph Nader:** Well you know, it's really fascinating to hear you speak like this because it's like bad business drives out good business. Like Gresham's law, bad money drives out good money instead of the reverse. It's supposed to be the reverse. Where are your products sold in the United States? Do you have problems with retail outlets, some big ones don't carry it? Where are they sold all over the country? You have Castile soap. You have soap in the form of shaving cream. You have liquid soap. Where are they sold?

**Gero Leson:** So traditionally, old Emanuel Bronner, he just went to the co-ops, right? This was 60s-70s. And for the longest time, it's the natural products retail scene that carried our products--the Whole Foods [Market, Inc.] and the Sprouts [Farmers Market, Inc.], and just these smaller chains usually. Over the last seven-eight years, that started to change massively. So any self-respecting natural food store, of course, carries Dr. Bronner's. We're really present, but that's not going to help us grow enough. So we've now moved into mainstream retail and there's Ralphs and Vons and Kroger's and Targets. We're in Costco [Wholesale Corporation]. We're in Walmart [Inc.] even. So even these retailers, some of which have mixed credentials start picking us up. Why? Because we stand for integrity, right? So any retailer ultimately wants to cash in on that. And I think that's a good trend. I don't think we've had problems with delisting because of our stance. Even though on our label, you may have seen this, the quarter liquid soap bottle, we use it as an advertising column, so to speak, right? And it says, 'Heal Earth' or 'Heal Soul' and advertises the campaigns we're doing, including the legalization of psychedelics or the shift to regenerative, and that hasn't caused much of a backfire. It's really interesting to see that retail actually seems to be pretty open to the kinds of messaging we do, which is really rather radical. Like we're going way beyond what big companies do when they support the breast cancer foundation or do something else. We're pretty radical on that.

**Ralph Nader:** Can people directly buy, leaping over the wholesale retailer from Bronner?

**Gero Leson:** Yeah. We have vastly expanded our online sales. So we have a pretty extensive web store that does more, and does a higher and higher percentage of our total business. So that seems to be growing pretty well. So we have gotten out of just being limited to retail brick and mortar outlets.

**Ralph Nader:** And how did you fare in the COVID-19 pandemic era?

**Gero Leson:** It was really interesting. We're lucky enough to make soap and hand sanitizer. So we are an essential business. So production was never impacted. Most of the staff, the admin staff had to start working from home. And then as far as sales go, we had a hugely successful year. Last year, I think we grew in revenues by some 30%. And it's really interesting; so everybody was complaining of about supply chain disruptions. We had none of this for our raw materials. Even though India was locked down, Sri Lanka was locked down, Ghana had trouble, [and] Samoa, you couldn't even access. But we were always able to ship, including [to] Palestine. The problems were with local packaging, right? We ran out of bottles for hand sanitizer. We

were short on cardboard. But overall, actually this last year was a great year for us, I hate to admit.

And if you had seen how we spent that money, actually the second half of last year, much of it went into bonuses for staff. We had to just add second and third shifts. Then we supported relief activities in India hard core. Then we supported the racial equality movement very, very strongly since June. So I watched that extra profit we made spent with open hands. It was actually really enjoyable for me to watch how we used our profitable machine to put millions into ballot measures.

**Ralph Nader:** Just to extend what you're saying in terms of range, we've sent this book to all the leading environmental groups who have their own magazines. And I'm very curious to see whether they are going to review this book; [whether] they are going to show standards that could be emulated, because that's their purpose is to transform the economic system, so it's not just sustainable, but it's humane, it's productive and so on and so forth. Before Steve and David pitch in here, just one last factual question. Where are your manufacturing facilities and how many workers do you have--just to give our listeners an idea of the size of your organization.

**Gero Leson:** We're, I think, now at some 280 staff in the United States and the production of our soaps—the liquid and the bar—is almost exclusively in-house, right? We have a large facility in Vista. That's North County, San Diego, where our key products are made. So we actually cook the soap from the ingredients. We ship our ingredients straight to Los Angeles, and then they go to Vista. We have a couple of smaller products that are outsourced, but the key, the signature products are made down in Vista. The number of staff actually is not as big, and I sometimes compare. We have more staff on, I say my projects in Sri Lanka, in Ghana and Samoa, than we have total employment in the United States. So the total community of people that work directly for us is more in the thousands plus. A medium sized company [with] revenues [of] \$200 million last year; we hit just barely. So we've grown tenfold ever since I joined.

**Ralph Nader:** Well, we've been talking with Gero Leson, author of *Honor Thy Label: Dr. Bronner's Unconventional Journey to a Clean, Green, and Ethical Supply Chain*. Steve, David?

**Steve Skrovan:** Gero, could you go into a little more detail because we're at pretty much the first anniversary of the murder of George Floyd and tell us how Dr. Bronner's responded to that, and were there any consequences?

**Gero Leson:** Well, we responded on two fronts. Number one, we looked, of course, at what groups would we support strategically? This came up in the first meeting after the murder of George Floyd. The question was 'How do we engage?' And eventually, we've decided to support a couple of coalition groups that engage in racial justice, right? So I think we must have spent several million on that just this last year--all of these extra profits. And much of this covers just providing supports to local, spontaneous actions and demonstrations than it was providing long-term financial support to NGOs who support the case. So that's what we did externally. There were camps where we sent support. Well, it overlapped with actually the Corona [COVID-19] relief as well, where we supported food kitchens, et cetera. It was not so much on the racial



equality issue. So, it was really long-term support of groups that dealt with the issue and just made it more public and supported.

There was also the question, though, taking the look at ourselves, right? We're highly diverse in that our majority of staff is Latino because we're down in Southern California. And we have an enormous percentage of Latino women that have moved up the ranks, right? Our company is rather transmissive, I guess is the right word. But we also realized that we're low on Black staff. So, we became a little introspective very early on. And we realized that in North County, San Diego, if you want to increase participation of African Americans, you actually need to actively go out and change your recruitment process and solicit people and not just rely on what's locally available. Many of our staff are local staff.

So, we responded on those two fronts. And then as far as statements go and using our website, of course, on blogs, for instance, and support the movement, that's a no-brainer. We do that all the time. Backlash, none, no. It's what we do. I think it comes from the heart and people can see that it's not just Eco washing, so to speak. And I think our customers and also retail, they respect that. So, there's the occasional crazy troll mail you may get on social media, but it's been very limited.

**Ralph Nader:** We're out of time, Gero, unfortunately. And this has been very, very informative and enlightening and encouraging all at once. So give us the website once more before we conclude.

**Gero Leson:** So, our website is [www.DRBRONNER.com](http://www.DRBRONNER.com). [drbronner.com](http://drbronner.com).

**Ralph Nader:** Thank you very much. We've been speaking with Gero Leson, author of *Honor Thy Label: Dr. Bronner's Unconventional Journey to a Clean, Green, and Ethical Supply Chain*, published by one of the world's biggest publishers, Penguin Press. Thank you very much.

**Gero Leson:** Gentlemen, thank you very much for having me on the show.

**Steve Skrovan:** We've been speaking with Gero Leson. We have a link to his book, *Honor Thy Label*, at [ralphnaderradiohour.com](http://ralphnaderradiohour.com). Let's take a quick break. When we come back, we're going to find out how an army of 16-year-olds took on the Democrats. But first, let's check in with our *Corporate Crime Reporter*, Russell Mokhiber.

**Russell Mokhiber:** From the National Press Building in Washington D.C., this is your *Corporate Crime Reporter* "Morning Minute" for Friday, June 4, 2021; I'm Russell Mokhiber. A federal judge in California has once again turned down an effort to settle potential future cancer claims against Bayer's [AG] Monsanto over its Roundup weed killer. Judge Vince Chhabria rejected the settlement, dealing a major blow to Bayer Monsanto and to those class action attorneys who initiated the proposal, led by Elizabeth Cabraser [federal district judge] and Sam Issacharoff [law professor/New York University School of Law]. "The settlement proposed by these attorneys would accomplish a lot for Monsanto," Judge Chhabria wrote. "It would substantially diminish the company's settlement exposure and litigation exposure at the back end, eliminating punitive damages and potentially increasing its chances of winning trials on compensatory damages. It would accomplish far less for the Roundup users who have not been

diagnosed with Non-Hodgkin lymphoma. For the *Corporate Crime Reporter*, I'm Russell Mokhiber.

**Steve Skrovan:** Thank you, Russell. Welcome back to the *Ralph Nader Rader Hour*. I'm Steve Skrovan along with David Feldman and Ralph. Let's meet one of the leaders of a progressive youth movement that's transforming the Massachusetts Democratic Party. David?

**David Feldman:** Calla Walsh is a political organizer from Cambridge, Massachusetts. She has worked on electoral and advocacy campaigns at the federal, state and local levels, and she is currently teaching a course on winning the youth vote at Movement School, New York City campus. And she's doing this all at the age of 16. Welcome to the *Ralph Nader Rader Hour*, Calla Walsh.

**Calla Walsh:** Hi, thanks for having me on. It's great to be here.

**Ralph Nader:** Welcome, Calla. Can you tell us how you got interested in politics? It's fairly unusual for people of your age.

**Calla Walsh:** Yeah. So the first organizing I ever engaged with was climate organizing and that was for the youth climate strike back in 2019. And I got engaged because it felt really accessible. It was with people who were also all in high school, and I really just wanted to feel like I wasn't sitting back and letting adults make decisions that would impact my entire future. I wanted to take ownership and feel like I was doing something no matter how small it was. So we were able to turn out tens of thousands of people to a climate strike in Boston. And at the same time, I fell in love with electoral campaigns. And I think I sort of realized that movement building and protests go hand in hand with these electoral and legislative victories and that we need to work really hard to achieve both.

So since then, I've worked on a lot of different campaigns at all different levels. And now I think local politics is really where I felt like I've been able to make a lot of change and really been able to learn the most. And I highly encourage other young people to get involved at the local level because there are so many opportunities to take on leadership. I think a lot of young people who are interested in politics think, 'Oh, let me go work for the senator or the president' and really glamorize the idea of working for someone famous. But I actually think that local politics is where we can have some really big impact and often they go hand in hand with those national issues.

**Ralph Nader:** Tremendous impact. There are a lot of boards and committees in local communities. They can't fill the seats. So the board of education, the zoning board, the health, can't even fill the seats. So there's no reason why once you are at voting age, you can't fill the seats. And we've been long advocates of giving the vote to 16-year-olds. If 16-year-olds are old enough to work, they should be old enough to vote. I hope you're on that mission as well.

**Calla Walsh:** Definitely. My city council has actually passed a petition to lower the voting age and so have a lot of other cities around Greater Boston. Sadly, the statehouse has not moved on it at all, but hoping that will change. And I'm hoping we can primary out a lot of the more

conservative Democrats in the Massachusetts State House right now, which is 80% Democratic, but they're really not passing any progressive legislation and they're killing some really, really progressive bills.

**Ralph Nader:** You must have a lucky choice of parents. Tell us about your parents. And do you have siblings that are active too?

**Calla Walsh:** My siblings aren't super active unless I drag them along to events with me. My parents have never been super politically engaged beyond just voting and like reading the news and staying educated, but they've always empowered me a lot. I used to read *the Boston Globe* every morning when I was in second grade and it started giving me a nightmares since I was always interested in the crime and murder stories. So they had to cancel the subscription. But they've always encouraged my interest in current events and politics. And they usually vote how I encourage them to, and I will also drag them along to canvases, to protests, to different events.

I got my mom to give public comment at a city council meeting a couple of days ago where my city council in Cambridge was debating a pro-BDS [Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions] resolution to end city contracting with companies complicit in human rights abuses in Israel. And she gave public comment for the first time, which was really, really cool to see. So I think often a lot of young people want to take action, but they don't really know how unless they see another person their age actually stepping up and doing the same thing. So I hope that I can serve to show other young people that this is possible and that you should really not let your age limit you in whatever you do.

**Ralph Nader:** You're starting to feel the power of young people your age all over the country. And as you know, some of the things you did increased voter turnout among young people between 18 and 24 in the last election. I mean, if they've voted at the same level percentage wise as older people, you'd have remarkable impact and a winner-take-all type electoral system around the country for members of [US] Congress and the White House. Were you inspired by Greta [Thunberg] in Sweden on climate disruption?

**Calla Walsh:** Yeah, absolutely. And of course, she led the climate strikes that originally got me engaged in politics. So she's made a huge impact, and often there just needs to be one person to step up, or one movement to be built, and that can change the lives of millions of young people across the world who see that it's possible. Just like how the anti-Vietnam protests worked, how Occupy Wall Street worked, I think that the climate movement has done the same thing for a lot of people my age. And it's so much more than just climate—you know, we view it as an issue that's intersectional with racial justice, with economic justice, with so many other issues and we take a really intersectional approach.

**Ralph Nader:** You read a lot every day?

**Calla Walsh:** I should more. I think I spend too much time on Twitter and I should start reading more books, but I definitely have a reading list this summer. So let me know if you have any recommendations. I'm going through some of Angela Davis's books right now.

**Ralph Nader:** More than recommendations, we'll send you a whole bundle of books. And do you read the newspaper at least once in a while, *the New York Times*, *the Boston Globe* or whatever?

**Calla Walsh:** Yeah. I'm very tuned in to local news and I've started getting back into podcasts too now that I'm back at school in person. On my commute, I take "the T" [Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority] every day to school. So on my commute, I have been trying out some various podcasts. But yeah, I'm a big local news person.

**Ralph Nader:** And how are your teachers reacting to you at the high school. What high school do you go to?

**Calla Walsh:** I go to an all-girls school in Boston, actually. And I will say the article in *the New York Times* ["An 'Army of 16-Year-Olds' Takes On the Democrats"] mentioned my C+ grade in precalculus. So my precalculus teacher was very amused by that. But I'm glad that this came out because I think I consider school more of a side job and that organizing and activism takes up a much bigger part of my life. And I just think it's a lot more important to me. And hopefully they understand why school might not be my biggest priority, because there are things that I'm more passionate about outside of school. And I think it shows them that I'm more than just the student who sits in class, but I actually have a lot going on outside of school. And yeah, it's definitely been interesting to talk to teachers about this since. I mean, a lot of these topics that I work on outside of school ended up coming up in class.

**Ralph Nader:** There's no reason why your social studies teachers don't have a citizen skill and experience course. We learn how to practice democracy, learn how what the tools of democratic action are. Let's start with Senator [Ed] Markey.

**Calla Walsh:** We joined the campaign after more progressive candidates in the Democratic primary lost and we had no hope that [Joe] Biden would pick up the policies we cared about. So we worked for Senator Markey because we expected him to push them on these issues. One thing we've been following this week is the \$735 million arms sale to Israel and the congressional oversight and the power that they have to prevent Biden from selling those weapons to an apartheid regime. And Markey has not come out in opposition to the arms sale yet. So that's like an example of something that we're really pushing him on. I think there's a lot we can do.

**Ralph Nader:** There's a lot you can do, and you can make history by getting the Congress to hold the first congressional hearing ever featuring Palestinian and Israeli peace advocates. A lot of them are former generals in Israel, ministers of justice, very prominent Palestinian advocates, writers, lawmakers, and they've never had a voice since the beginning of Israel. Only the war-making forces, only the support of Israel's military occupation gets heard at the Senate [Foreign Relations Committee] and House Foreign Relations Committee. You want to check out and see that Senator Ed Markey, who has spent a lot of time on domestic politics; he is on Foreign Relations Committee. And if you can get a hearing and these prominent peace advocates will jump at it; they'll come right over. It'll be not just a virtual hearing; it'll be an in-person hearing, first-time ever. You will see that it will be a great educational experience for members of

Congress because it's been a taboo. You never let the peacemakers have a hearing on Capitol Hill--just the ones that want war, more armaments for Israel, more violations of federal law in the use of military weapons to Israel for offensive purposes and so on and so forth.

So if you add that to your list, Calla, we will help you in Washington. And we'll get a lot of other groups helping. But you actually can get it rolling better than the most established citizen groups on these issues in Washington. [That's] because you're back home, you spell votes, you spell the future, you spell energy, you spell refusal to be sweet-talked and sugar coated, and you don't want anything in return. So you're not going to cut a deal. You should do the right thing and doing the right—and he knows this; inside Ed Markey, he knows the Palestinians have rights. He knows it should be a Palestinian state. He knows that the US taxpayer is being burdened by fueling this military operation over there. You just have to do what you've done already [which] is put it out in the public, make him respond and make him feel that you're the wave of the future.

And now he's okay for six years now, so he's not worried about reelection. But what you do is you bring out his better angels, because you're not trying to turn around someone like Mitch McConnell or some other guy in the Republican Party [like] Lindsey Graham from South Carolina. He really quietly agrees with you. And what you need to do is just surface it, so he can use his enormous seniority in the Congress to the betterment of world peace and justice. All right, so how are you going to grow? How are you going to expand? Do you have any ideas on training? I hear you're into training people your age on civic skills and political organizing. Give us an idea.

**Calla Walsh:** Yeah. I mean, I think for so long, the establishment has held the tools that you need to gain power. But really their tools aren't starting to work anymore. We saw that with the Markey campaign, where young people took a really unprecedented approach to digital organizing and using social media to relationally organize our peers, and to turn out voters, and to get people to sign up to volunteer and donate. And now, a ton of people are asking us 'Hey! How did you do that?' But the thing is none of these strategies work if you don't actually have a progressive policy platform.

So, what I really care about is giving people in my generation and people in the progressive movement as a whole the tools that we need to organize against the establishment, because their toolbox is limited and ours is completely unlimited. We have so much potential for the ways we can organize. They have the money; they have the power; they have the lobbyists. But just to give the example of the pressure campaign we've done on Ed Markey, we don't have money; we don't have lobbyists; we don't have those behind-the-scene connections that AIPAC [American Israel Public Affairs Committee] or Democratic Majority for Israel do that they're using to lobby him. But we do have this incredible public platform and unlimited potential to grow support for our cause.

So, I'm really excited, to like you said, continue teaching at Movement School. They're starting a national campus to train people to work on campaigns. But I think a lot of these skills can be used, not just for electoral campaigns, but for issue-based causes, for protest movements. And where the establishment is weak is that they don't have people power. Sure, they have money.

Sure, they have the mainstream media on their sides. But they don't have people power. We do. And my generation does. And we can really beat them by knocking on doors, by turning out on the streets and really by mobilizing people in an unprecedented way, even if we don't have the money and the tools of the establishment to do that.

**Ralph Nader:** Absolutely. People say, look how powerful all these corporations are in Congress. They own Congress. They've got...the corridors in Congress are full of their lobbyists--the oil, the gas, the banking, the insurance lobbyists, et cetera. And I say to them, "How many votes do they have?" They don't have anywhere near the votes of people back home that Congress has turned its back on. It's only 535 men and women [who] put their shoes on every day like we do. And so you've got to show people that they shouldn't grow up feeling powerless because then they defeat themselves, right? When they grow up feeling powerless, like you hear a lot of people your age, especially when you get to college, they're very cynical; like that's the in thing these days. That's cool to be cynical. Well, that's exactly what these big corporations want. They want young people to be cynical because the next step is they withdraw, they drop out of democracy and they're zero in terms of challenging power and building a productive and just society. So how are people reacting to you? How are people your age? How's the media reacting? How are what we call grownups reacting? Give us some sense.

**Calla Walsh:** I think people are surprised because I feel like most coverage of youth organizing and the youth vote in general has always disempowered young people and just pushed this narrative that we don't vote, that we just are addicted to our phones, and that's the only thing we care about. But I think the narrative that was presented in the recent article and that sort of carried over to other discussions of this is that youth do have power and we do have a lot of influence. And the reality is that adults are terrified of what we've been able to do. Like the whole consultant-industrial complex has no idea how to approach working with us or against us.

And I guess I feel proud because I think I've been doing this work alongside of my peers for so long with very little recognition, and youth organizing in general is just so underfunded, so overlooked; people just completely disregard it. So it feels like a big accomplishment to finally achieve recognition for what we've been doing. And I hope it leads to people taking us more seriously because they should be scared of us, and we do have real power and influence in our state and increasingly across the whole country.

**Ralph Nader:** Once you give them the impression that you're growing; they're terrified of any movement that's growing, that's not static. You got to give them the impression you're growing. Like when you write a letter to a senator [or] representative, it's always good to have a PS at the end of the letter and say, "There are only three signatures here, Senator, but if you want us to get 30 signatures, no problem. Just let us know." That kind of dynamic really gets their attention. I hope this is just the beginning, Calla, of our willingness/ability to help you and help other people. You'll see this go very fast. The one thing nice about the modern age is nice things can spread much faster than in the old days. Steve and David, you want to pitch in here?

**David Feldman:** I'm just curious. You're going to be voting for our next president and maybe even in the midterms. So what tools does your high school [and] what tools do high schools in general give people your age to register to vote?

**Calla Walsh:** Yeah. So my first election will be the 2022 midterms, which I'm very excited for because our governor, our Republican governor, is up for reelection. Honestly, I have not seen schools do more than like the tiniest bit of civic engagement with students. And I think there needs to be so much improvement. I preregistered to vote when I turned 16 because that's the age that you can preregister in Massachusetts. But I would have no idea if I hadn't been told that I could from other people.

**David Feldman:** Do you have teachers teaching you to register and showing you how to register?

**Calla Walsh:** I have never had that. But I mean, something I'd love to do next year in the fall, since we have a really exciting city council and mayoral election in Boston, would be to run a voter registration drive at my school. I think that'd be great to do. But sadly, it's not really part of the curriculum. And I mean, of course—

**David Feldman:** My daughter's high school had an ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps] but nothing with civic engagement, nothing getting the kids to register to vote, I don't think.

**Ralph Nader:** But they had an ROTC in high school?

**David Feldman:** Yep.

**Ralph Nader:** A military ROTC in high school?

**David Feldman:** Yeah.

**Ralph Nader:** Let me ask you this. We need your help on something else here. We have invited Senator Elizabeth Warren to come on this radio program and this podcast, and talk about her book, which is called *Persist*. You probably know about it; it just came out. We get no response. Now I've long admired Senator Warren when she was a law school professor at Harvard [University], and we've always had very good relations, and we've always supported regulating Wall Street and protecting consumers, et cetera, which she's made a good mark on. But it's been very hard ever since she became senator to get her on the phone. So I want your help to just ask her or ask her staff why isn't she going on *Ralph Nader's Rader Hour*. We've been inviting her over the years and she has not come on. Now, this may seem counterintuitive to you, but with all the experience we have in Washington, you have more influence over Senator Warren than we do. You realize that?

**Calla Walsh:** Yeah. I mean, I was actually an intern on her presidential campaign and that was the first campaign that I like really fell in love with and I loved working for her. So that's too bad to hear she hasn't come on the show. I'm sure she's really busy, but I would be happy to reach out to her since it's important that people are able to hear her especially on outlets other than just the media.

**Ralph Nader:** Right. Well, this is good. Calla Walsh, we've been talking to. And talking with. And are you ever going to have an impact, Calla. And you just contact us if you need anything, if

you want to connect with any other group in Washington or around the country. I hope you learn about MassPIRG [Massachusetts Public Interest Research Group], which I started years ago, which has college students; they have full time staff. They work very much on environment in Massachusetts. You might want to look it up if you don't know about it. And the best of luck to you. We will send you a whole bunch of good materials and books for you to peruse. Any last words, Calla?

**Calla Walsh:** Well, just thank you so much for having me on. I really appreciate you using your platform to uplift youth voices since we're not heard enough. And yeah, thanks again. It was great to chat and I'm really excited to follow up on all the important issues and pressure campaigns that we can get started on.

**Ralph Nader:** I love your emphasis on results. Results. You're not going to be sweet talked by politicians. Thank you very much, Calla. And stay in touch. Hope to hear from you in the next few days.

**Calla Walsh:** Thanks again. Bye, guys.

**Steve Skrovan:** We've been speaking with Calla Walsh. We have a link to her work at [ralphnaderradiohour.com](http://ralphnaderradiohour.com). Now, Ralph, there was an ad in *the Washington Post* that you wanted to talk about. It was a statement signed by a lot of celebrities and major corporations and it was entitled, "We Stand For Democracy". You want to comment on that?

**Ralph Nader:** Yeah. It was signed by a lot of major corporations and ton of major corporate law firms and the heading was "We Stand For Democracy: Government of The People, By The People" but they forgot 'For The People'. [chuckle] They lopped off the 'For The People'. It's hard to conclude that that was a mistake.

**Steve Skrovan:** What do you think would be behind that?

**Ralph Nader:** Well, they didn't run out of space, so it wasn't a space problem. I think that they didn't want to go to the conclusion. A government of the people, that's okay; they're people. Corporations are people. A government by the people, that's okay. It's by these corporate lobbyists; they're people. But a government for the people--maybe they didn't want to give too much enthusiasm to their PR effort.

**Steve Skrovan:** That's interesting because I would have seen that; most other people probably wouldn't have seen that significance, but you're right. It's like, all right, it's by the people who are voting or who have the power to influence everything, but who is it for? Wouldn't have thought of that.

**Ralph Nader:** That's right.

**David Feldman:** I have a question for Ralph on this. Do corporations—since they're such big believers in democracy, do they practice democracy in their corporations? For example, when



shareholders vote not to give their CEO a raise. I would assume the CEO goes, “Okay. I won't get a raise.”

**Ralph Nader:** No, it's a total top down dictatorship. You know that. [chuckle] It's a reverse of the capitalist principle that if you own property or shares, you should have considerable control over them. And what these bosses of these giant corporations have done is they've stripped their owners of any power whatsoever and seized it themselves. So, if they want to give themselves bonuses with a rubber stamp of the board of directors, they do. If they want to buy back billions of dollars of stock to enhance the metrics for their compensation, they do. Sometimes they even merge with other companies without even asking their shareholders for approval. Total tyranny.

**Steve Skrovan:** I want to thank our guests again, Gero Leson and Calla Walsh. For those listening on the radio, that's our show. For you, podcasts listeners, stay tuned for some bonus material we call “The Wrap Up”. A transcript of this show will appear on the *Ralph Nader Rader Hour* website soon after the episode is posted.

**David Feldman:** Subscribe to us on our *Ralph Nader Rader Hour* YouTube channel. And for Ralph Nader's weekly column, it's free; go to [nader.org](http://nader.org). For more from Russell Mokhiber, go to [corporatecrimereporter.com](http://corporatecrimereporter.com). To support Whirlwind Wheelchair, visit [whirlwindwheelchair.org](http://whirlwindwheelchair.org). They do great work showing people in the United States and around the world how to build sturdy, economical wheelchairs from local materials. [whirlwindwheelchair.org](http://whirlwindwheelchair.org).

**Steve Skrovan:** And for an independent news source that believes people are more important than corporations, go to [populist.com](http://populist.com). Read or subscribe to *the Progressive Populist*. If you email [populist@usa.net](mailto:populist@usa.net) or call +1 800-205-7067, they'll send you your first issue for free. That's +1 800-205-7067 where your first free issue of *the Progressive Populist*.

**David Feldman:** Join us next week on the *Ralph Nader Rader Hour*. Thank you, Ralph.

**Ralph Nader:** Thank you, everybody. Let's hear from preteens and teens and their reaction to Calla Walsh's energetic work in strengthening our democracy.