

All Ears with Abigail Disney
Season 3 Episode 8: Varshini Prakash (Re-Air)
Young People Will Inherit This Earth
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ABIGAIL DISNEY: Do you need any of the soundcheck-y kind of things to happen? Okay. Good stuff. Let me just hide my laptop away, and we will get started.

INTRO MUSIC

Hi all, Abby Disney here. We are not releasing a new episode this week, but we'll be back next week with a great conversation with that super smart New York state Senator Jessica Ramos. So look out for that in your feeds.

In the meantime, it felt like the right moment to revisit my conversation with Varshini Prakash. She's the leader of the Sunrise Movement, the climate activist organization that popularized the Green New Deal. These are young activists who've been remarkably effective at making people in Washington pay attention, and they often use confrontational tactics.

News Anchor: *Demonstrators who stormed House Speaker, Nancy Pelosi's office demanding a clean energy bill.*

Fox News Anchor: *Protestors gathered outside the Phoenix office of Arizona Senator Kyrsten Sinema.*

Amy Goodman on Democracy Now: *A group of five climate activists have entered their eighth day without food demanding President Biden do more to address the climate emergency.*

ABIGAIL DISNEY: When I spoke with Varshini last February, President Joe Biden had just taken office and it was a moment full of hope. But if you've been paying attention this week, you know the bloom has fallen off the rose. Two Democrats, Senator Joe Manchin from West Virginia, AKA coal country and Senator Kyrsten Sinema from Arizona, together, have basically put the kibosh on the biggest climate initiatives in the huge Democratic budget bill. Before the bill was gutted, it was held up by climate activists as our best chance to get moving on an already urgent climate situation. And people worry that without America leading by strong example, it will be hard to get other big emitters—countries like Russia, India, China—to buckle down and make real commitments at the international climate conference in Glasgow, Scotland this week. Which is why it's worth revisiting this conversation with Varshini. It's a reminder of how far we've come, where collective action and organizing can get us, and maybe we can reconnect to that feeling of hopefulness. That can't hurt, right? So enjoy our conversation and we'll be back with a new episode next week.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: So I'm gonna read a little intro and then we will jump in. Does that sound good?

VARSHINI PRAKASH: Let's do it.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: If you care about climate change, the past few weeks have brought some welcome news.

ABC News Anchor: *President Joe Biden signed executive orders aimed at tackling climate change, calling it an existential threat to the planet.*

Al Jazeera Correspondent: *The Paris Accords is one step in President Joe Biden's strategy.*

John King on CNN: *The climate crisis will now be a major part of every administration decision.*

Joe Biden: *Today is climate day at The White House.*

ABIGAIL DISNEY: When Joe Biden threw his hat into the ring for the presidency, no one expected aggressive climate action from any potential Biden administration. His early proposals were seen as middling (at best), and he refused to sign onto the Green New Deal.

Chris Wallace: *Do you support The Green New Deal?*

Joe Biden: *Pardon me?*

Chris Wallace: *Do you support The Green New Deal?*

Joe Biden: *No, I don't support The Green New Deal.*

ABIGAIL DISNEY: And he wouldn't commit to end fracking.

Kristen Welker: *Would you rule out banning fracking?*

Joe Biden: *I do rule out banning fracking.*

ABIGAIL DISNEY: But the political winds have shifted thanks in no small part to the Sunrise Movement, a nationwide mobilization of young people fighting to end the climate crisis. Sunrise made waves in Washington by backing progressive challengers to Democratic seats and showing up in ways that get attention. In 2018, a sit-in at Nancy Pelosi's office went viral, and from there the movement grew-- they now have 400 chapters across the country and thousands of members. For the past two years, Sunrise has kept the climate conversation centered on jobs and justice. And it really feels like they're just getting started.

Varshini Prakash at the Climate Strike: *Politicians are going to have to know that they win or lose depending on where they stand on this issue.*

ABIGAIL DISNEY: That's Varshini Prakash. Ferocious and bad ass executive director of the Sunrise Movement, which she co-founded in 2017. Now, at the tender age of 27 years old, she is one of the most effective voices speaking up for The Green New Deal and the need to act on climate change now. Varshini, welcome and thank you so much for joining me. I'm so excited to talk to you.

VARSHINI PRAKASH: Hello. Thank you so much for having me. It's just, it's wonderful to be here.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Well, I want to start with your way into organizing and climate change. Did they come together for you or did one proceed the other?

VARSHINI PRAKASH: Yeah, that's a good question. I don't think I knew what organizing was. I probably spent most of my childhood and adolescence with a deep aversion towards politics, really. I felt like it was something that didn't include me, as this young, skinny Brown girl growing up in the United States of America. So much of the conversation about climate change in the environment gets focused on the devastation and the destruction and the pain and the loss and the grief. But the story of coming to it is more of a love story. I, from a very young age, fell in love with the world around me. I was captivated by the trees and the mountains and the sun and all the little critters. It was just this beautiful refuge to me, of a place to escape and be creative and be imaginative and have agency in my little strip of backyard where I grew up outside of Boston. And, it was a place that was magic. I think as I got older and learned more from my middle school and high school classes about piles of trash in the ocean and Hurricane Katrina and the climate crisis and really underlying it I think that the greed that was contributing to all of this. I remember this moment when I was 14 sitting in my environmental science class or something like that and saying this is what I want to work on for the rest of my life. Like this is my dream.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Oh, that's so beautiful.

VARSHINI PRAKASH: Yeah! I didn't know what to do that time, but I think when I got to college, I sort of tripped and fell into a fossil fuel divestment campaign on my college campus at UMass Amherst, which was really just getting the university to stop investing in coal, oil, and gas companies, and invest in the things that move us towards a renewable energy future and that they had a duty to do that, because they were stewards of the next generation of leaders in this country. And this is where I fell in love with the concept of organizing as tons of ordinary people coming together to do extraordinary things. And from that moment when I was 19, I haven't stopped since.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah. And you had a victory at 19 in college, right?

VARSHINI PRAKASH: Not exactly 19, but yes, 21, 22, something around there. We ran that campaign at UMass Amherst for three years. We actually won that campaign and became the first major institution to divest from fossil fuels.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Wow.

VARSHINI PRAKASH: University to divest in fossil fuels.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: That's a big victory and you're young. Yeah. And I mean, well, victory is addictive a little bit, right?

VARSHINI PRAKASH: I do like winning. Yeah. I care about the climate. It's also fun to win.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: I'm so struck by the fact that you had an environmental sciences class at what year of high school, ninth grade?

VARSHINI PRAKASH: I don't remember exactly what year. I took earth science when I was in the ninth grade.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Did you see the movie, An Inconvenient Truth? You were probably about--

VARSHINI PRAKASH: I did, I saw An Inconvenient Truth in that class and I think I could wrap my head around the climate crisis, but at that time, they were saying something like we'll have to deal with this problem by 2020, something like that. And I'm 14, I'm sitting in this class and I'm thinking 2020, surely some capable, intelligent group of adults will figure out the solution to this problem by 2020. We all know what happened with that. And as I became older, it became a more dire situation. The calamity was just emerging and clear and visceral all around us. And neither side of the political aisle, really had a plan for what we were going to do about this crisis. Even if Democrats were able to name that they cared about it and understood the science. And that was kind of one of the initial reasons why we even formed Sunrise was realizing it isn't a matter of whether you have a D or R in front of your name. It's like, we're not doing enough across the board. And young people are going to inherit this Earth. We're going to be strapped with the responsibility. We're the first ones to bear the brunt of this crisis. And the last one's really with any significant power to prevent essentially mass death is kind of how we're thinking about it.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Well, that's where it's headed. I can't imagine what will happen in Bangladesh as the seas rise. I can't imagine. And all the places that haven't--that have contributed to the least are the ones that will suffer the most. This is the part that's really infuriating about the casualness with which it's discussed in Congress. I'm actually, okay, I'm going to say I'm old, but I'm not really that old, I'm 60. Right. And I have some children older than you. And, when I think of that, you were born in 93?

VARSHINI PRAKASH: I was born in 93.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah. So you were born in the Clinton administration and probably started being aware of politics during the Bush administration I'm guessing, and maybe felt a little hope

at the beginning of the Obama administration and then saw the hideous backlash against him. So you've been formed in this crucible of really perverse right-wing intransigence. And the remarkably disingenuous style of politics that they've been practicing. And climate change got turned into a belief system. And so your work really kind of arises out of this kind of very--a unique historical moment. I've never, I don't know if we've ever had one side of the political aisle that's willing to lie as wantonly and as forcefully as the right wing has lied about not just this, but other things. Do you think it's worth trying to convince people with facts and information? Or is that just not, is it not worth trying?

VARSHINI PRAKASH: I think it's absolutely so worth trying. I think the vast majority of people, even with Fox News blaring about how climate change has been a hoax or that there's still debate about the validity of the science, which, that case was closed decades ago. Even with all of that atrocity, a majority of Americans on both sides of the political aisle understand that the crisis is happening and want the government to do something about it. There's tremendous support for a renewable energy future. There's tremendous support for creating millions and millions of unionized good paying jobs in a renewable energy economy to try this transition away from fossil fuels. There's tons of support for ensuring that clean air and clean water are inalienable human rights and the list goes on and on and on. So I think what we're seeing at this moment and I feel you're right. A lot of my generation was sort of born at the cusp of like the end of, this concept of, bipartisanship as we have known it, and kind of at the beginning of, a really political tribalism. And I think it's critical to remember that the majority of people in America have pretty divergent beliefs from what Republican elites are proclaiming about either their base or about the issues themselves.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: I would be so angry if I were born in 1993. I really would. I'd be looking at the older people and wondering what the hell they were thinking all that time.

VARSHINI PRAKASH: Yeah.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: I mean, how do you feel about the folks who are talking about, oh, well, let's find the middle ground, let's find the compromise. I mean, is there such a thing as middle ground where this is concerned?

VARSHINI PRAKASH: Yeah. I mean, there is no middle ground and it's not ambition for ambition's sake. Right. It's hard enough as it is. We're simply sounding the alarm of what tens of thousands of scientists world round have proclaimed has to happen in the next decade or we are screwed. And we have got to rapidly decarbonize and we've got to make sure that the economy that we prop up in the absence of a fossil fuel driven economy is one that is truly inclusive. People who've been left out of economic prosperity since the dawn of America. These are indigenous communities, Black and Brown communities who are bearing the worst of the effects of pollution or of sea level rise. And I think-- I felt like a lot of the reason why we started Sunrise was also realizing like the politicians, the adults, who we are counting on are asleep at the wheel. And at the beginning it was a lot of despair. It was a lot of just anger. It was a lot of frustration that fueled the kind of impetus to start Sunrise. And I think the critical piece of all of

this is that we're trying to give young people a vehicle to channel that rage. So it doesn't, so an entire generation of young people isn't lost to nihilism or defeat or resignation about what the future can uphold, but can be moved into productive political and societal transformation, both for our country, but also for themselves. And that is like the essence of what movements aim to do.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: I think the big, bold strength of what you're doing is, you're not, you don't have your finger in the air. You're not checking where the wind is blowing. You're just like, look, this is what has to happen. You can react however you want to react, but this is what we're going to do. And I do think that a little bit like the previous iterations of the environmental movement were too concerned with communication. They were too concerned with sentiment. And they just weren't thinking about just barreling through.

VARSHINI PRAKASH: Yeah. I mean, I think a big part of what some of Sunrise was developed, at least in response or in reaction to was what we saw amongst the environmental movement. One was a lot of these organizations got really big, they got wealthy, they got bloaty and started to believe that access or relationships on the Hill translated to what it took to build power, to win legislative change, right? And what we saw was just a lack of actually building movements outside of DC and relying so heavily on ads and lobbying efforts and things that were really kind of insider strategies and not actually building the coalition between environmental organizations and environmental justice organizations that are led in local communities with primarily Black and Brown and low-income neighborhoods. And you know, a lot of what we're missing in the 2000s was yes, we had TV ads and we had public opinion that was with us on the issue of climate change. But we didn't actually have an activated, intense, like willing to be disruptive movement of any group of people. We didn't have that kind of sustained movement effort that could both support the legislative change that could support our candidates and elected officials on the inside, but also be building an active, vocal, disruptive effort on the outside that could say, you know we're going to hold these elected officials responsible and accountable to their actions.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: So give me an example of disruptive actions.

VARSHINI PRAKASH: So, it's a lot of the stuff that you see on the news. It tends to get the most attention. These include some of the wide awake actions that we did actually outside of Mitch McConnell's house, back during the uprisings, this summer, calling on him to provide justice for Breonna Taylor. We have done actions targeting senators and congressional representatives in their offices, calling on them to back the Green New Deal if they refuse to do so. And we've done--our hubs really take the lead, our local chapters, take the lead on deciding what those actions can look like for their own communities.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: That inside ball thing that you talk about, that's so right.

VARSHINI PRAKASH: Totally. Yeah. And I think that this is where, if I could just say a word about Sunrise's theory of change, like we're not trying to say, this inside game or the legislative

fight or any of these things are not important. They're critically important. We've got to translate the level of public energy and opinion and all of that that exists right now into tangible legislative change for the long term. That can't just be overturned by the next president. And, part of what we're trying to do is say, we need both a critical mass of enthusiastically supportive public officials, people who are willing to stick their necks out on the issue who are not afraid to take a risk, who aren't afraid to receive pushback who are willing to bring the movement into the halls of Congress, essentially. And generally, if people are good on climate, they tend to be good on a variety of other issues as well that young people care about whether that is about addressing gun violence or the pandemic or addressing racial inequality and police brutality, whatever it is. And that's one piece of the puzzle. We also need to have people power. We need to have an activated base of millions of people across this country who are organizing their neighbors who are voting on the issue who are donating to organizations who see themselves really as part of the movement who are even posting on social media. And so I think, what Sunrise is working to do is really bring both the political side of this and the people power side of this into one coherent strategy. So for example, when this moment happened in 2018 that you mentioned in your introduction, we had already been organizing for six months prior in a bunch of swing states for the 2018 midterms and built up a bench of awesome leaders across the country. And many of them came to DC. About 250 of them came to DC and participated in a day of training and building relationships and so on and participated in the events that happened the day after, when we had an action at Nancy Pelosi's office and Alexandria Ocasio Cortez, who was Congresswoman elect at that time joined us. She hadn't even been sworn in yet. And then from that moment we realized, whoa, something huge just happened here. There were thousands of articles written about a Green New Deal within 48 hours. There was all of this momentum that had been built in just a matter of minutes. And we realized we had to keep it going. And so in that moment, we realized this could be a moment to shift the national conversation about the climate crisis away from carbon markets and parts per million in the atmosphere and on and on, and actually center it on racial and economic justice, on a massive economic program. And so, I think exactly one week later we issued a call out and over 330 different actions and lobby visits happened across the country to various Congress people. Three weeks after that, we called for a thousand young people to come to DC. And we did three simultaneous sit-ins targeting folks like Nancy Pelosi again, but also other members of house leadership. And from that point, we teamed up with AOC and Ed Markey and launched the Green, New Deal resolution, which essentially created a framework for the most ambitious climate justice vision that the federal government had ever pursued before. The day before we did the action, we probably had about 20 Sunrise chapters across the country. Six months from that date, we had over 350 in almost every state in America. Thousands and thousands of young people were just pounding down our doors being like, how do we get involved? That summer we had over 250 plus public town halls that took place. Talking about what a Green New Deal would mean for various communities in places that you would never suspect would be having a conversation about the Green New Deal.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Let me ask you, I mean, so when you went to Nancy Pelosi's office in 2018, were you going there hoping for this to be viral or were you surprised that it went viral?

VARSHINI PRAKASH: Yes. I would say both. We, I mean, anything you do you hope it will be wildly successful. I think, at that time I was like, if we get an article in the New York Times, that would be unbelievable. And it just went beyond our wildest imagination. We, it was covered in, in basically every major newspaper across the country, even internationally. It catalyzed activity in other parts of the world, folks in the UK and Australia, Canada, thinking about what a Green New Deal for their economy might look like. Virtually every democratic presidential candidate in the aftermath, because of people were doing very aggressive organizing and bird-dogging and so on in every state that these candidates were coming through, every major democratic presidential candidate released a climate plan endorsed, at least in name, the Green New Deal in some kind of way, and actually swore off of oil and gas contributions for their presidential cycles. So that means that there has been a precedent set. Fossil fuel corporations and their donors have spent billions of dollars misinforming the public on the reality of the climate science, they had the best science about climate change back in like the 60s and 70s. And yet they have denied and deceived the public on this issue for the last 50 years in large part, because it would affect their bottom line because they couldn't burn fossil fuels. And so Sunrise along with our partners has gotten hundreds, if not thousands of politicians to sign on to this pledge, rejecting contributions from these actors. And we were actually able to secure every single democratic presidential candidate to swear off of oil and gas money. And so did Joe Biden. And so there's been a lot that has been won in the last couple of years. And that has increased and created sort of a race to the tops around ambition rather than where we were three or four years ago, which was talking about climate as though it were a political loser. But now I think this historic juncture that we have come to, is making so much more possible than we ever thought would be before.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: And I was going to ask you how much of it was timing because, in the sense that there's been a lot of work done in the years leading up to this. And the ground's been softened and of course the Green New Deal is something that got talked about long, long before 2018 in certain circles. Van Jones was talking about green jobs in 2008 and he was hounded out of Obama's administration by the right wing. But how much of this is being an effective communicator, organizer, whatever, and how much is it that, that it was time.

VARSHINI PRAKASH: Yeah It's all of the above and I'll also say like, I don't, I don't think there's a single idea in the Green New Deal that's particularly new. Communities of color have been calling for the right to breathe and have clean water for a very long time. We've had indigenous nations asking why pipelines are snaking through their lands, but not through their white neighbors communities for a very long time. We have had labor organizations who have been casting a lot of doubt on whether green organizations really care about them when we're talking about the transition away from fossil fuels and they're totally right.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: They didn't!

VARSHINI PRAKASH: They're totally right. So none of these ideas are new. They were just, at the right time repackaged and put out into the world again. And to me, there's a few things that I think made it pop off. And one was a really deep desire to communicate and ensure that our

politicians were working towards the full scope of the crisis at hand and not leaving any community behind. And that is ultimately what the Green New Deal is. It is the full summation of what it takes to address the climate crisis in a way that eradicates racial and economic inequality without leaving any community behind.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Oh, I was just gonna say, and it's easier to organize a society positively around winning rather than not losing. And that was really the big shift.

VARSHINI PRAKASH: Right. And so much of our-- it was like two things in that vein. You had one where our movement had been so focused on devastation and chaos and calamity and at the end of the world and all of these things, and it's like, oh my God, when I hear that, I just want to like, go up to some bunker in the middle of Vermont and never see anybody again and learn how to like grow my own food or something, because that is horrible. Like it makes you want to retreat and not participate in the world. And I think we've got to have this combination of both urgency as well as hope. I have a sense that things can and will get better if we take action collectively. But then it was also a solution that addressed the full scope of the problem, but also was not about pain and punishment for middle-class or working class people. And the vast majority of the warming that has occurred has been in large part due to fossil fuel corporations and their willful denialism of the validity of the science for the last 40 years. And so I think, you know, the Green New Deal is an attempt to say, whoever pays for this crisis, it is not going to be the workers, it should be the corporations. It should be the wealthy, it should be people who got us into this mess to begin with or who have a ton of money to spare, and that this will be good for working people. This will invest in the common good and in public services. And improve the lives very tangibly of people. Lower electricity bills, improve public transportation like allow us to have healthy food from local communities and eradicate food deserts. There's so many, so many things that are actually going to improve people's lives. And we've got to communicate it because, I really believe that fear and anger can only go so far and that's true on the left and the right.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: That was a really hard argument to sell to people when they just had to, you know, didn't know where their next paycheck was coming from. So I do think that, like, this is a little bit of a whirlwind that, that, that we are reaping. Older, the older generation of activists. And I do think that that An Inconvenient Truth kind of contributed to that because it was so negative and it spent, what was the movie, like an hour and 40 minutes or something, and it spent maybe 10 minutes on, "but it'll be okay, we're going to fix it!" And like, that was it. The whole movie was relentless and by the way, boring.

VARSHINI PRAKASH: Yeah, I'll be honest. I didn't like it. It did not spur me to action as a 14 year old.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah. And it energized the right. Speaking of backlash, Donald Trump, we gotta talk about him for a second. How bad is his impact and how hard will it be to unwind?

VARSHINI PRAKASH: Well, it's actually less about reversing some of the damages of the Trump administration and even more about the time lost. I'm really feeling the loss of what it would've meant to have an aggressive administration that understood the severity of the climate crisis, and now it's a matter of being able to make up for lost time, which in this political environment is going to be really difficult. Thank God for Georgia. Thank God for the Black organizers who have been building up in Georgia for a very long time and who had the foresight to be investing early and year round, because if we did not win in Georgia, it would be a completely different scenario.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: You know, the problem with viral moments is they feed this narrative that suddenly things happen. But the reality is you don't get a Georgia without years of sustained organizing and work, and you can't exploit a viral moment unless you're set up to do so, which takes years of hard work. And, I think that we are just so married to this idea that there's a magic bullet or a one answer to a complicated question. The old generation of Democrats were sort of raised in the civil rights era and they were sort of weaned on the idea that a law is gonna change everything. And that there's a finish line, and that there's a point at which you've accomplished it. And now you can all go home and drink a beer. And this has really been to our detriment because what I hear in your voice when you talk about organizing is joy. And, that's actually been my experience too, is all the joy and all the worthwhile relationships and everything that ever mattered to me came to me in the context of organizing. And what I realized is there's no finish line and that's the good news. That's actually the good news. This is what keeps me from despairing. And the question people always ask is, oh, you deal with such depressing things. How do you do it? And I'm like, I'm surrounded by the best people on earth!

VARSHINI PRAKASH: Totally. And it's like to feel a sense of agency to feel like you can make some kind of difference. That sounds corny, but it's so true. It's, and I think what you're saying is absolutely right. I have met the best people doing organizing work, like lifelong friends. I met my partner. Like you meet the best people doing organizing because it's people who believe that another world is possible and who don't just believe it, but are willing to fight for it and who are willing to take the risk and the vulnerability of putting out a vision and then to work like hell to make it reality. And that's--those are, I believe every person is capable of that. But the ones who choose to do it day in and day out are an extremely inspiring bunch to be around.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah, they are. It's really kind of extraordinary. But let me ask you this question. Cause I mean, this might be a little bit dicey for you. You've sort of gone from sitting in at Nancy Pelosi's office to like Joe Biden loves you and wants you to be on his climate committee. And I mean, that's a, that's a really big, that's a really big shift. I mean, like you've gone from being on the outside to a little on the inside and people on the outside don't like the people on the inside. I mean, there's always tension there. I mean, like how does that feel to you to be kind of in the room where it happens?

VARSHINI PRAKASH: It's hard. It is very hard. I really struggled with it when I was on the climate unity task force that you were alluding to. And it's tricky. I think there is a lot of sentiment on the left that like, we can't do anything that might temper the full scale of our vision and our

beliefs, a certain sense of, honestly, I think it's righteousness that, if we can't get the full scope of what we want it's not worth participating in, or people voiced a fear that they were using me. And I was like, I mean, probably, but also I'm using them. So, everybody's using everybody. It was really weird. I just had never imagined myself being in those rooms ever. If you had asked my teenage self, like, can you imagine being on a presidential task force to discuss the parameters of climate policy for the next presidential administration, I'd be like, hell no. And so I think any good leader, I think in this moment, especially if you're going to work in politics, does need to be able to navigate these things because if we are not doing whatever it takes to push the agenda and progress forward, we're we're leaving power on the table and it is good news that many of our ideas are now becoming mainstream or at least parts of our ideas are becoming mainstream. It is good news that our people are ending up in positions of power in an administration. It is good news that people who share our values and our vision for the world are part of this administration or deciding the policies or active in conversations about personnel. That is good news. And what's clear to me is I wouldn't have gotten onto that task force if we hadn't spent the last two years being a thorn in the side of the democratic party. And if we hadn't bird dogged them every state that they were in, if we hadn't held demonstrations, if we hadn't communicated our vision far and loud, there's no doubt in my mind that we would have definitely not been in that room and definitely not been able to push the agenda forward.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: So what is the unity task force?

VARSHINI PRAKASH: The unity task force was a policy task force. Actually, there were, I think, six of them that Bernie Sanders and Joe Biden created together and they each had five Biden representatives and three Bernie Sanders representatives. And I served as one of Bernie Sanders delegates to the Climate Unity Task Force. And for six weeks, we met up in zoom rooms and I was in one with Secretary Kerry and Alexandria Ocasio Cortez, and Gina McCarthy. And I was like, what am I doing here? And that I was like, no, I'm totally supposed to be here. And, it was a process of creating and crafting the parameters and the policies that would guide the build back better plan for Joe Biden, really the governing policy framework and agenda that he was going to use for his four years in office.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: I will say that it says something good about Joe Biden, that you bird dogging and pressuring and all the rest of that stuff brought you into the room because there are many politicians for whom that would have made it less, not more likely for you to be in there.

VARSHINI PRAKASH: I really agree with you. I mean, that was true, I think of the Obama administration.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah.

VARSHINI PRAKASH: I think this is quite a difference and that's a good sign.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: I'm going to give you an unsolicited piece of advice, because like, you know, in the movie, Forrest Gump where the ball just sort of rolls up to his feet and he's like, Ooh. And

he picks up the ball and he starts to run. That's how I feel about power. That, that's how I feel about having any power. So, okay. You have the ball, what are you gonna do with it? Right. And I think that we all need to pick up the ball and just fucking run.

VARSHINI PRAKASH: That is great advice, and I actually love unsolicited advice.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: That's a good sign about you.

VARSHINI PRAKASH: Yes, I love it. Please shower me with anything else. Any other unsolicited advice you have after this podcast.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Varshini Prakash is the remarkable leader of the Sunrise Movement and a leading voice on how to address all the problems facing us as a result of climate change. Check out the book she co-edited called *Winning the Green New Deal: Why We Must, How We Can*. And don't forget to follow her on Twitter. @VarshPrakash. A million thank you, Varshini. You're wonderful.

VARSHINI PRAKASH: So are you, thank you so much for having me on here. This was a wonderful discussion.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: What a pleasure.

All Ears is a production of Fork Films. The show was produced by Alexis Pancrazi and Christine Schomer. Wren Farrell is our Assistant Producer. This episode was engineered by Veronica Rodriguez, and Florence Barrau-Adams. Bob Golden composed our theme music. The podcast team also includes VP of production Aideen Kane. Our executive producer is Kathleen Hughes. Learn more about the podcast on our website forkfilms.com. And don't forget to rate, review and subscribe wherever you get your podcasts.