

**Podcast Series: Holistic Nature of Us**

**Episode # 54 : Meet: Kyleigh Hillerud**

**<https://www.judithdreyer.com>**

Hi I'm Judith Dreyer,

Thank you for joining me for this pod cast series "The Holistic Nature of Us".

My intent is to take us, you and I, into a better understanding of the concepts behind our holistic nature and how that ties directly to the holistic nature of the world around us. How can we connect the dots in practical ways that we are nature and nature is in us?

I feature a broad range of guests deeply concerned about the environmental issues of our time, and that includes us, authors and educators, practitioners and others whose passion for this earth helps us create bridges. These folks are innovators, action oriented, creating solutions in a variety of ways that honors ours and the planets holistic nature. I am honored to share their stories, their projects, their passion with all of you.

And today I'm delighted to introduce you to Kyleigh Hillerud. Kyleigh is a sophomore. She is a visual art major in a school of Fine Arts and a design major. She is also the coordinator for the UConnPIRG zero waste campaign.

Welcome Kyleigh, it's an honor and a pleasure to not only talk with you but to be a part of your enthusiasm and all the good things that you and your committee are actually creating on the campus, so welcome!

KYELEIGH: Well thank you so much for having me. I'm really honored to be on your podcast.

JUDITH: Good. Let's begin with you. You're a sophomore, you're in the school of fine arts, design is your major. How did you get involved with the zero waste campaign?

KYELEIGH: Well before I got involved with the zero waste campaign, I was just involved with the UConn PIRG in general. It was my freshman

semester and I think it was like my second class I'd every had. They came in and had a class announcement. Basically, what got me, they said, "we are mobilizing students to make change."

We don't have to wait until post graduation to make a real change. Some of these issues that we worked on, before college, like activism, I was aware of it. I thought it was a very polarizing political thing but when I came to college, I was like I knew no one, because I come from out of state, so I knew no one at this huge university and this was my first opportunity to get involved. And I said, okay, I'll do it. And I became an intern on the 100% renewable energy campaign. I was really kind of under fully understanding of what was happening in our environment. Like I was aware, but I was becoming like hyperaware of the actual impact that, for example fossil fuels and natural gas are doing on the environment. I got involved in that campaign and worked on it for about 2 semesters. And then we went to a conference in Boston, like a whole group of us, and it was basically about like zero waste. And all these like people, it was like this whole group of people and a lot of these people were community members in small towns in Massachusetts. They were like yeah, like we're the Girl Scout troop and we were like able to get a bag ban done and this is how we did it. And just watching their stories and listening to them and talking to them face to face like inspired me. That's what really got me interested in the zero waste campaign because I was like oh, we can make real action on this? That's like simple but it's also very effective. And at that meeting that we went to in Boston I really understood the impact of our waste. Like again, I knew it was bad, but I did know how bad it was. And yeah, that's what kind of got me interested in zero waste. But then...but this is like my first semester actually running the campaign because last semester I was working on increasing voter turnout for the midterm elections but yeah, this is my first time running a campaign and I'm really excited about it because we have lots of victories with this campaign, especially locally, that we're building movement to bring it state wide, which is the whole point of the campaign, with the state wide bag ban.

JUDITH: So Kyleigh why don't you take us through the victory, if you could sum that up for us and then tell us how you're going forward.

KYELEIGH: This campaign originally started as the stop polystyrene campaign. This is like foam containers, foam cups. This was simply like a corporation campaign targeted against Dunkin Donuts with their foam cups.

That campaign started I think fall of 2017 and then by spring 2018 Dunkin Donuts made a commitment to phase out polystyrene cups by the year 2020 which was an awesome victory for all of us nationally, like nationwide.

But then after going to this conference, we were like okay let's focus here. Let's focus on Mansfield. Let's focus on UCONN and see what we can do. So, we met with the, actually at this conference there were people from the Solid Waste Advisory Committee which is a committee in Mansfield basically, kind of self explanatory. They're worried about solid waste. They were there and they were like, oh you guys are from UCONN and we're like yeah and we kind of started talking and they were like yeah, we're trying to work on getting a bag ban passed in Mansfield. Kelly Rafferty at the time was like, she really took like a lead on this. She was like what can we do to help this, to make you go faster basically. And they were like "can you build student support?"

So that's what we did. Because at the time we thought that the bag ban would have jurisdiction over UCONN, which we later found out that wasn't the case, but when we found out, when we were originally doing this, we started you know just going in dining halls and be like hey would you be in favor of this? And a lot of students said yes. And a lot of students agreed with it and they were like really behind us. I can't remember the actual number of student petitions we got in the spring, but it was well over 1,000 I believe. And we just like started like basically educating the public and being like, hey like these are the actual harmful effects of plastic bags and this is what you can do maybe day to day to mitigate those effects. We were talking with this always with the budget advisory committee. We kind of did all we could do. What we were doing with them was basically education, because there really wasn't much else, we could do besides be like, hey your student support. But also, we went to testifying in the town hall. We said hey we're the students in Mansfield, like we actually care about this. And it was amazing to see. We actually did that like 3-4 weeks ago, I think. There were like...it was packed.

JUDITH: Good for you!

KYELEIGH: It was packed. Especially with like young children, like elementary school children. The community really came together and showed support of hey, we actually care about the community. We actually care about the environment. This community cares about this environment.

Here's some small steps that we can take to better it. So that was really powerful but as well as our work at UCONN we were able to get UCONN dining services to ban plastic bags in the union. And, basically that was kind of like we sat down with Dennis Pierce who is the head of dining services and we said hey, like what do you need for this to happen? I think that's such an important thing. Like having those meetings be like, okay this is what we want. What do you want for that to happen basically? Then he said, show me that students support this. And we did that. That is something that we are really good at doing, is talking to students and saying face to face like, hey would you like this or if they're like no, we're like okay, so why? And then maybe explaining some of those environmental impacts. They're like oh, that makes sense. Why do we even need plastic bags if you're just carrying out like a small mac and cheese. Like you don't really need that. Then we just built student support for dining services around this and then 90% of the students we surveyed were in favor of this. And then literally like the week before finals we got the go ahead and it was like yeah, we're gonna not have plastic bags anymore. We're going to have paper bags which are not much better but paper bags with a fee to sway students to bring their own bags.

JUDITH: Right. What I liked about in your story was that you asked a very important question of the dining service; what do you need?

KYELEIGH: Yeah.

JUDITH: Because in order for something to be a win/win everybody's got to feel #1 supported and #2 the action that they have to take is appropriate to what they can give out. And if they can't give it out, it's not going to be affective. So it sounds like you guys have the right approach, the right timing and people are open to it. It's happening around the planet anyway whether we like it or not. It's happening in our country town by town whether we like it or not. We're getting rid of plastic bags and you guys have made a huge impact on college life with your campaign.

So, tell me more! You got the dining services and now I believe you said you're looking at legislation?

KYELEIGH: Yes. So right now, this campaign, is our state wide campaign. We're not only UConn PIRG, we're part of ConnPIRG which is a bigger state wide organization where we have a chapter at UCONN Hartford and

then Trinity College both, they're both in Hartford. We decided as a state, we're like okay we want this to be our lead campaign. We're like okay, so we want to be a lead campaign but what's our...I'm trying to think, like what's the lens we're looking at? I said, I was like I think we should try a state wide bag ban. Like it's building momentum. If you look at the states around us, like where I'm from in New York, it's like in the city they just and going into this year they banned plastic bags. It's building movement in small towns upstate where I'm from. In Massachusetts, literally every other town has one. In Boston, just recently going into the new year again bag banned, banned bags sorry, so it's building movement in the state not only here in Storrs but also in Westport, a bunch of places in Fairfield County.

So, it's like I think we should you know have a state-wide angle on this legislatively. And then since we are state wide organization, we do have a lobbyist in the state house who basically is like our man on the inside and he was like yeah, I think this is a good idea. He said without us doing like anything, without us doing anything that there's going to be bills proposed for this. And he was right. Like three bills were proposed for different variations of the bag ban. So that could be like a bag ban and then a bag ban with foam containers also.

Um, so, right now where the bill currently sits it's actually in the Environmental Committee so it's a small group of 1 both senators and representatives who care about the environment basically, and they look through all legislation that's proposed about the environment and then they vote whether or not, they vote on it or against it, we want to vote on it and them to vote on it so that the bigger you know CGA, Connecticut General Assembly can vote on it. So right now, what we're doing is we're kind of mobilizing students. We're first of all kind of researching these like, these committee members especially the top six to kind of do that thing again where it's like we want to meet with them and say, okay we really want this as students. Like what do you need from us to like show you that basically? But also, we are collecting petitions. We have a goal of about collecting 3,000 petitions from UCONN alone. Basically, saying "hey, I'm a student from UCONN and I supported this and I think that you know the environmental committee, the CGA and then eventually Ned Lamont should sign off on this and vote on it. We are holding big events." So, these are big events not only to promote this but like "hey, do you see what we're doing" but to educate people. Because a lot of people don't, I mean like I don't want to say they don't understand but I just don't think they know like all of

the facts because talking to people they would be like, well how can I like carry my groceries or something like that. Or like, is this really going to be effective? It has such a small carbon impact. And we'd lay out the facts and they say like "hey this is actually really important, especially if we look at just pollution in general and then plastic pollution is, I mean plastic production is very harmful to surrounding areas."

So basically, getting them the facts and also giving them the resources so if this gets passed it's like hey, this is like these are some of the resources that you can use to basically live a less wasteful life. Then we want to plan, we're trying to plan this zero waste awareness week actually. Basically, which is going to be like a bunch of workshops giving students like those resources, probably like a less wasteful life especially on campus because it's really hard on campus. Like all the dining services, they'll use like plastic shell containers when folks are just sitting two feet away from where they got the food and be like throwing them out, so kind of giving students those resources. As well as just you know like doing with letters to the editor in local towns. Writing letters to our local representatives and saying hey, like we care about these issues and I think you should vote favorably on this. And then doing like call ins. So recently on Thursday, on Valentine's Day we had a legislative call in table and we were able to get like 35 students to call their representative and be like hey, I'm your constituent. I go to UCONN. There's this bill, I have to see the actual number, um there's this bill coming up. I want you to vote favorably for it because of this reason.

JUDITH: And what's the bill? Do you have the bill number?

KYELEIGH: Yeah, I'm getting it right now. It's Senate Bill 227 – an act prohibiting the use of single use plastic bags. Yeah, so basically the campaign is mobilizing students to talk to their representative and talk to their representatives and sign petitions in support of this but also to get educated and have those resources to live a less like wasteful life.

JUDITH: Let me ask you this, having worked at WestConn, I taught WestConn Holistic Health Studies for a number of years and my impression of the UCONN college system is, yes you've got UCONN but you have the other universities like WestConn, Eastern CT, Central CT are they part of your umbrella or are they separate institutions doing their own thing?

KYELEIGH: They're separate institutions. Like UCONN we have, it's UCONN and then it's UCONN Hartford, like UCONN Waterbury, UCONN Avery Point. Like we have those different campuses. But WestConn, Southern, Eastern, are like different entities. I think they're all the same, like all the other state branches but they're not like, they don't fall under like UCONN's umbrella.

JUDITH: Okay. Interesting. So, you've got this great campaign and you sound like you have several action steps in place to get in touch with the legislators and to make your point, your talking points and to give them good quality information. I think what I find a little bit disappointing with some legislators is that you can give them some of the science, but they still discount it anyway. I'm sure you're going to be up against that a little bit just because everybody has their opinion about how to read facts and we all, you know we get that, but you still want to make a point and you have to get those resources together.

Are there any resources you can give my listeners that you think would be valuable for them today to look into?

KYELEIGH: I definitely think just like in terms of like plastic pollution and resources, definitely like the documentary Bag It. It's very eye opening of like the really like awful effects of plastic pollution not only in the US but worldwide. It's just really eye opening and it's kind of shocking to see those images of just like beaches like filled with plastic. So, it provides a lot of like science behind, kind of like plastic in oceans and how it breaks down and how that affects marine life. It's really interesting. It's a really good watch.

JUDITH: Good. I know I watched several years ago Water, that documentary and they go into how a plastic bottle is made. I believe they highlighted one facility in Texas and there was actually quite a bit of illness in that town.

KYELEIGH: Yeah, I'm pretty sure that's Huston.

JUDITH: Oh, it's Huston, okay.

KYELEIGH: I'm pretty sure it is. I went to just in January our national conference for like PIRGS, like our student PIRG chapters and we were talking just like I think, I'm pretty sure it is Huston but um, like the residents

around those production plants like they've just see a raise in like childhood cancer by like, I don't know, by a lot. But it's just crazy how awful the production aspect of it is too with the use of like natural gas in making plastic bags.

JUDITH: Yeah and we're going to start to change that industry as well when every town gets on board across our country. It's going to make a difference for the particular models that are in place will have to change, and people have to get work. So, if they worked in the bottling plant where do they go if the plant closes down? We're talking about a really huge issue that has tremendous impact on life style and changes to us as a country. What's surprising to me is that we just are so far behind European countries who have made some great changes, and they've done it, it seems like it's not they done it but they've done it in a way that it's incorporated today in their lifestyle. It's not something that they're struggling with, if that's the right word.

Any other resources? So we have: they can call ConnPIRG. Is there a site that you like to recommend that gives tips on how to decrease your waste?

KYELEIGH: The EPA is always a good one in my opinion. They really just break down, especially reducing food waste, which I think is something that is not kind of talked about. The impact that food waste has, especially in our society where you know we have folks who are homeless and our impact of food waste and how we could kind of shift that to maybe it's helping another issue. The EPA has some really good resources on like food waste and how to reduce that and how to actually compost at home. That's something that I've kind of struggled with in college is, how do I compost here because there's no resources and it's kind of hard. And UCONN by itself doesn't have a composting facility and we don't to my knowledge compost the food. So that's a good resource as well.

JUDITH: That's your next campaign, huh?

KYELEIGH: Yeah well, we have at Conn PIRG, we also have a hunger and homelessness campaign and one of the guys there, Austin who is great, he is trying to start a thing called Swipe Out Hunger. This would be using this leftover food that like dining service produces. Instead of throwing it out, like having it for folks who don't have meal plans, or students who are struggling on campus financially and having kind of like a food pantry.

He's definitely working on that. But that's something that we want to work on in terms of industrial composting. Like that is something that I think we could do. Like most colleges in Boston have composting in all their dining halls and then they ship it off to an industrial composter and they deal with the waste there.

JUDITH: Interesting. Well we certainly have some great potential for your college years, to stay involved with this, especially getting this legislation through which is huge kudos to you if it does go through and it does pass.

KYELEIGH: Thank you.

JUDITH: Do you have three tips from your perspective that you'd like to share with the listeners?

KYELEIGH: Yes. **Talk to your representative and your legislators.** They don't get a lot of calls in general from their constituents and just like that one call really is kind of impactful to them. So it's Senate Bill 227 – An Act Prohibiting the Use of Single Use Plastic Bags. You can find your representatives number on the CGA website and not only even calling but writing them a letter or even an e-mail. Just any form of contact works, like “hey I really support this and I think this is why you should as well.”

2) **Reducing your waste on an individual standpoint** is also something that's really important because you can like preach this but if you don't live it, it's very hypocritical. So just you know, you don't have to go all of nothing fast but making those slow steps to you know, not going to Dunkin every single day and using their foam containers and bringing your own or making coffee at home. Those small steps really have like a very large environmental impact in my opinion, so that would be another one.

3) And just talk to people. Like talk to your friends about this. Talk to your family about this. Get their perspective. This is one of my favorite things to do, especially with my father because me and him disagree on a lot of things. But just like talking to him will be like, well why do you think like this would be a bad idea? And just kind of like understanding that side but also **sitting down and having that conversation** where it's like well actually like this would happen or these, this is what you could use to mitigate that affect if this goes through. So just talking to people and you know educating them if they, that would probably be the last one.

JUDITH: Cool. Those are very good. I just want to reiterate the first one, talking to your legislators so I can be really clear with the listeners. In CT they can go to the CT General Assembly website and look up their town. They can find out who their state representatives are, as well as our federal congressman and senator, if they don't know that already and shoot them an e-mail. That's a very easy thing to do because when you go to that website and you click on their name their e-mail is right there so you can just send that off. And I highly recommend people to do that. We need to be more proactive. It's very easy to get complacent and I think we're in the problems we're having environmentally because we've gotten very complacent.

So, you're doing some good work Kyeleigh.

KYELEIGH: Thank you so much.

JUDITH: Okay. Do you have anything else to add before we sign off?

KYELEIGH: Go Huskies that's my call!

JUDITH: Go Huskies! Oh, my family and friends are all UCONN Husky fans, that's for sure. Well listen. It's been a pleasure talking with you. I'm truly honored and in awe of the work that you and your committees are doing at your age level on campus making a difference. We need more of you to raise your voice and take practical action. And I think that's what you're doing is taking practical action.

KYELEIGH: Thank you so much for having me. It's an honor. I love talking about the work we're doing because like you said, not a lot of people are doing it and more young people need to be doing this work because students are the forefront of social change and any social movement and social revolutionary aspect. Thank you so much. I really appreciate it.

JUDITH: You are welcome! So I'd like to say that I'm Judith Dreyer. I'm the author of "At the Garden's Gate", book and blog. My book is available through my website [www.judithdreyer.com](http://www.judithdreyer.com) as well as several distribution arms such as Amazon, Nook, Goodreads and more. I'd like to remind all of you that a transcript is available for each podcast. Please like and share them. Let's get the word out and support each other.

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Enjoy your day.