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Fighting for the future

UW-Madison student is at center of lawsuit to force action on climate change

BY [VICTORIA DAVIS](#)

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Vic Barrett: “I knew I couldn’t ignore this because my generation is who’s going to be screwed over by it.”

Growing up in New York, Vic Barrett wanted to make a difference.

“I was always interested in human rights in the way any young, black, Latin American, queer, transgender person growing up in a very white community is interested — I just wanted to plug in and get involved,” says Barrett, who is a UW-Madison sophomore.

That calling became urgent when Barrett learned more about global warming. “I knew I couldn’t ignore this because my generation is who’s going to be screwed over by it,” he says.

And so Barrett eagerly joined a lawsuit, *Juliana v. United States*, which seeks to force the federal government to take action on climate change. The lawsuit is supported and facilitated through Our Children’s Trust, a nonprofit organization whose goal is to lead a game-changing, youth-driven global climate recovery campaign. The Trust, with the help of Barrett and 20 other plaintiffs, is suing the government for “failing to support their constitutional right to a healthy atmosphere and stable climate by taking direct action to perpetuate the global climate crisis,” explains Barrett.

Much like his fellow plaintiffs, whose ages range from 10 to 21, Barrett got started on the justice-driven path early. While attending high school in Manhattan, Barrett began working with Global Kids, a group dedicated to teaching youth about human rights, social justice and how the two pertain to climate change. With Global Kids, Barrett pushed city politicians to mandate better climate education in all New York City public schools, K-12. In 2013, he joined the Alliance for Climate Education, an environmentalist movement partner of the Trust with headquarters in Boulder, Colorado.

When the Trust asked the Alliance for people to join the lawsuit, Leah Qusba, the group’s deputy director, immediately thought of Barrett. “Vic is an extraordinary young person,” Qusba says. “The fact that he’s so driven by human rights issues, by the justice aspects of climate change and especially about gender equity — he was in the right place at the right time.

“So often young people, especially young people of color, are marginalized from these types of conversations about their own futures,” Qusba adds. “They’re always told that ‘adults make the rules’ but I see it differently. I really think young people should have a voice in decisions being made about their own futures.”

The lawsuit argues that the United States is infringing on the plaintiffs’ constitutional rights and that the courts must apply “underlying principles of the Constitution to new circumstances unforeseen by the framers, such as the irreversible destruction of the natural heritage of our whole nation.”

“Our Constitution establishes that current and future legislatures had equal power, so if our U.S. legislature does something that reduces the power of a future legislature, such as destroying the atmosphere irreversibly, that’s a constitutional violation,” says Adrian Treves, Barrett’s UW environmental studies professor who has followed the case closely since it began in 2015. “We have this problem with intergenerational inequity, so we’re trying to push for current and future generations to have equal rights, which is a legal principle that’s binding on current generations. But the current government is not complying with that principle.”

The Trust believes the U.S. government has known about the potential disasters of climate change since 1965, referencing the White House report on “**Restoring the Quality of Our Environment.**” The nonprofit is “challenging all the direct actions” the government has taken to “allow and promote” greenhouse gas emissions at unsafe levels, and is demanding a national plan to reduce carbon dioxide in the air.

“We found that public officials don’t listen to young people always, especially young people who can’t vote and especially because we don’t pay taxes,” says Barrett, who is majoring in both environmental studies and political science.

U.S. District Judge Ann Aiken in 2016 **allowed the case to move forward**, writing in her opinion that “a stable climate is quite literally the foundation of society.” But there have been **several motions** from both fossil fuel companies and the U.S. government to delay the case. Last year the fossil fuel industry was released from the case, per its own petition.

“This is going to court, there’s no doubt,” says Qusba. “It’s just these sort of gimmicks by the federal government to ask for more time. But we’re optimistic and hoping to go to trial earlier in the new year.”

Barrett recently took advantage of the U.N. Climate Talks in Poland to elevate the voices of youth pushing for action on climate change. On Dec 10, Barrett organized a protest, partnering with the movement #ItTakesRoots, to interrupt a Trump administration panel. Waving signs and chanting [“Keep it in the ground!”](#) Barrett and other activists flooded the conference room to draw attention to the lawsuit as well as the power of urban and rural communities on the frontlines of social justice movements in the United States.

“Poland is a country very dependent on the fossil fuel industry and it’s frustrating seeing these negotiators walk around in their badges and knowing they don’t have an emotional connection to the issue,” says Barrett, who has seen his grandparents’ coastal town in Honduras damaged by flood waters. “I’m happy to be here to hold people accountable.”

Barrett is scheduled to remain in Poland until Christmas. He acknowledges the sacrifices required of youth activists, but says the rewards are worth it.

“I’ve definitely failed a few classes and missed a few weeks of school in order to make this work, and I actually had to withdraw from this semester at Madison before coming to Poland,” says Barrett. “But those are sacrifices I’m willing to make because what I’m doing is so important to me. It’s something I just can’t let go of.”

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