

Sylvia Han

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### The Power of Civic Engagement

On a bright summer day in 2009, Marion Stoddart paddled through the Nashua River alongside countless other kayakers. The clear blue waters, whose edges were perfect reflections of the surrounding green foliage, shimmered softly in the afternoon sun. Stoddart was in the midst of filming a documentary detailing her role in the cleanup of the Nashua River, which had once been one of the most polluted rivers in America.

After moving to Groton in the 1960s, Stoddart had been appalled by the appearance of the river—it was foul smelling, sludge filled, and changed color on a daily basis due to chemical wastes that were dumped into its waters. Stoddart decided to take things into her own hands and make cleaning up the river her life's goal. She started organizing volunteers to go door to door asking for signatures protesting the condition of the river. Stoddart also contacted state and local officials from mayors to board of health members to former Massachusetts Governor Volpe himself. Finally, in 1966, Stoddart's efforts were rewarded with the passage of the Massachusetts Clean Water Act. However, she didn't stop there. Stoddart continued to enlist the support of thousands in order to turn the sewage-like waters into the swimmable river the Nashua is today. Stoddart's work not only resulted in the complete restoration of the Nashua River, but also continues to stand as a beacon of hope for modern conservation movements.

Marion Stoddart's actions showed just how powerful civic engagement—when ordinary citizens work to solve areas of public concern—can be. By being civically engaged, a community of people is able to rally together to create change and better society. Just like how Stoddart

dreamed of a clean Nashua River, I have long dreamed of living in a society where all children and especially girls are encouraged to consider careers in STEM. Since my earliest school days, I have watched as the majority of my peers automatically shy away from subjects such as math and science because they have a reputation of being “hard” or “boring”. Even worse, young girls especially are not considering STEM related careers, seen by the fact that women held only 27% of all STEM positions in 2019. This is why, as someone who will be attending Cornell University this fall, I plan on joining the student-led organization EYES (Encouraging Young Engineers and Scientists). The mission of EYES is to lead K-12 students in the Ithaca, New York area (where Cornell is located) through STEM related activities so that they can see just how fascinating math and science can be. In addition to EYES, I also plan on joining the Cornell chapter of TSM (The Stemminist Movement), whose purpose is to fight the gender gap in STEM fields by engaging middle school girls with STEM content.

However, just like with the Nashua River, it will take the passage of new legislation and government funding to create widespread change. The state of New York is currently waiting on the results of a study that will determine how much aid is needed to encourage instate women and minorities to pursue STEM careers. The study is required to submit a report by the end of this year. When that happens I plan on joining in on a movement that will advocate for the immediate funding of STEM education programs across New York. Methods such as social media campaigning will inevitably be used to spread awareness and garner support for the cause. In these ways, I hope that my civic engagement is able to help the children in my future community gain more appreciation for math and science.

It may seem daunting and even futile to go up against the status quo. After all, who am I to think I can possibly change the way children view STEM? However, it is through leaders such

as Stoddart that we see change is in fact possible. The movement that turned one of the most polluted rivers in America into a breathtaking natural ecosystem all started from a single person. Knowing this, what is there that *can't* be accomplished when a whole community works together tirelessly towards a common goal and a brighter future?

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