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## The Gore-y Truth

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TUESDAY, 25 MAY 2010 11:42 PAMELA BIERY [NEWS - LOCAL NEWS](#)



### **Climate change crusader Al Gore engages local youth**

Former Vice President and Nobel Peace Prize winner Al Gore opened his May 17 talk at California State University Monterey Bay with a classic quote from anthropologist Margaret Mead: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever does."

Every seat was taken for the fourth lecture in the annual series hosted by the Panetta Institute, a CSUMB-based nonpartisan educational foundation focused on public policy. The roughly 800 students in attendance came from campuses throughout the Central Coast, and the processes used to select them for participation were as diverse as the

region itself. Later in the evening, Gore would speak at an \$85-per-ticket event at the Golden State Theatre in Monterey (broadcast live on local television). But here, the crowd would be tougher to play to—after all, it rests on the slim shoulders of the students in this room and their generation to make amends for the climate crisis.

Gore's most recent book came out in paperback in November 2009. Titled "Our Choice: A Plan to Solve the Climate Crisis," it finds America's climate change action hero still sober and thoughtful, with opinions to spare. The book boldly declares: "It is now abundantly clear that we have at our fingertips all of the tools we need to solve the climate crisis. The only missing ingredient is collective will." Like most American action heroes, this potential protagonist has been exposed to a broad-base of finger-wagging and nit-picking, as well as a general loss of focus on the challenging antagonist at hand: the monster climate crisis threatening to undo us all.

Frank Sesno, director of the School of Media and Public Affairs at George Washington University and host of PBS' "Planet Forward" moderated, asking Gore pre-selected questions written by students.

### **Questions and Answers**

Gore opened the discussion with Central Coast students by recalling a time in his own youth when he was always asking "Why?"

"I wrote 'Inconvenient Truth' and now I understand there is a group calling themselves 'inconvenient youth' ... So today I ask, tell me why it's OK to put millions of tons of carbon [dioxide] into the atmosphere every day?" he posed.

An affable speaker, Gore's presence is unmistakably Southern, and his manner of addressing issues can be circuitous, in the gentlemanly way of a senator's son from Nashville, Tenn.

But students were up on their current events and didn't hold back on the tough questions. UC Santa Cruz student Eric Deardorff was responsible for one of the afternoon's less scripted moments. Circumventing the pre-selected question format, he stood up and interjected, "Mr. Vice President, in regard to your literature, you state the single most effective thing you can do to reduce your carbon footprint is to stop eating meat. I was wondering if today you could commit to doing what you say in your literature?" Gore responded by saying that he has cut back on his meat consumption, but is not a vegetarian—something he added is "a personal choice."

The majority of hard-hitting questions, however, were focused on the Gulf Coast oil spill. One question on the topic asked about how major corporations such as BP and Exxon Mobil could be held accountable for their actions. "We need to put a price tag on using the atmosphere as an open sewer," he replied, adding that changes need to be made to current laws and regulations and that a global treaty would help.

He encouraged the students to question the reasons for offshore oil drilling. "I would not buy into the idea

that our energy independence depends in any way on offshore drilling," he said.

Students asked him why, in the face of overwhelming evidence, some people persist in believing global warming doesn't exist.

Given the opportunity, how would he respond to those individuals in one minute or less? "Even if you don't believe it's happening, help the U.S. quit depending on foreign oil," he replied.

On that note, they inquired as to how they could affect change themselves. The answer was simple: get involved. "The single best thing we can do for climate change is to take action ourselves," he said. "If you want to make a difference, you really can."

Continuing, Gore waxed poetic, recounting his memory of when, as a 13-year-old, President John F. Kennedy put a pledge out that the United States would have the first man to walk on the moon. At the time, this was controversial. Many people thought it was irresponsible. Yet the dream became a reality, and when it did, the average age of the mission engineers was 26. That means when JFK made the pledge, these engineers were an average age of 18 years old. His message here was clear: youth can and have shaped our country.

In closing, Vice President Gore expressed his hope that some of the students in the room would consider going into public service. "Just remember to hold true to the people you represent," he said.

**Overall Impressions**

The event may have raised as many questions as it answered: Are we just making nice while the planet goes up in flames? Do we really have time to gather 800 bright young minds and send them out into the world without a clear directive for action? Why was the action-oriented arm of Al Gore's nonprofit The Alliance for Climate Protection and repoweramerica.org absent from the conversation?

Still, most of the students interviewed by Good Times say they gained a great deal of insight into the political process and the complexities of the issues.

Shelby Funk, a Cabrillo College student who is preparing for a degree in International Studies, felt that it was important to hear about individual empowerment and change through technology. "I really liked the points that were made as far as using social networking and the Internet to make change happen on a grassroots level," she says. "I was encouraged to hear how these tools are influencing policy. I would like to see multi-national corporations held accountable for their actions."

UCSC students Michael Peters and Shawn Freeman, who are both involved in community outreach, say it was a great example of community education and organization. Peters, a major in American Studies, is on his way to dual internships in Boston. "I will be working for AVOYCE, which is connected to the Asian Development Corporation and also CIGSYA, a gay youth organization," he says. "This presentation was strong from the point of view of bringing people together and building advocacy."

Freeman, who will be graduating in the Environmental Sustainable Living Program, has done work for Friends of the Urban Forest in San Francisco and sees his future involved with the development of sustainable gardens. He was impressed with the event's panel of educators who presented climate change issues as they are related to marine science, but he left with one qualm with the overall event. "I will admit I was a bit disappointed that when Gore was asked what he had done in his personal life to reduce his carbon footprint, all the things he listed were out of reach to high school and college students," he says. "I think this could have been stronger and more pertinent."

This lecture and more can be found at [panettainstitute.org/programs/lecture-series/webcast-video-archive](http://panettainstitute.org/programs/lecture-series/webcast-video-archive). Take action or learn more by visiting [unfcc.int/2860.php](http://unfcc.int/2860.php), [repoweramerica.org](http://repoweramerica.org), or [350.org](http://350.org). Pamela Biery is a freelance writer and communication consultant living in Felton. She writes for Sacramento News & Review, Airstream Life and other publications.

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