

The Suffolk County News

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Members of the SSCAC Committee with their mentor, Melissa Parrott.

Photo provided

Teens take on the environment

Story By: **RICK CHALIFOUX**

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SAYVILLE—A group of Sayville High School students recently formed a committee seeking to generate support throughout the local region for viable, clean energy solutions. The organization – Suffolk Student Climate Action Committee (SSCAC) – is already actively working to promote awareness of

the negative impacts of climate change/global warming and set goals to offset them for the benefit of the environment and future generations.

Prior to the committee's formation, Sayville senior Chloe Gaconnier embarked on a trip to Denver, Colo., with Melissa Parrott – education and outreach coordinator with the Central Pine Barrens Commission – to attend a climate change training seminar named the Climate Reality Project, which is led by former U.S. Vice President Al Gore. From March 2-4, Gore was joined by an extensive list of world-class scientists, communicators and climate experts discussing the impact of the climate crisis around the world – particularly in the United States.

The event provided Gaconnier and Parrott with the knowledge, assets and wherewithal to help build public awareness of global climate challenges, communicate about implementing realistic solutions, and offer public support for leaders at all levels of government seeking to undo the negative impacts of climate change.

The training also highlighted some of the consequences that New York and other states have suffered in recent years and may encounter in the future, as rising temperatures and increasingly unpredictable weather continue to threaten the region.

"We're seeing how much our seasons have changed over the last couple of years," said Parrott, who noted that the training is bipartisan in nature and had members of multiple political parties in attendance. "It is warmer longer, winter is shorter, less rain, less snow; we are in a state of drought, and storms are stronger. We saw from Superstorm Sandy what that can bring to Long Island, and we want to help prepare for the future and talk about the solutions."

"Long Island itself is such an environmentally dependent area, and the slightest upsets can be seen impacting [our everyday lives]," said Gaconnier. "The actions we take now are going to directly affect our generation and determine how our future is."

Based on their experience, the two decided to formulate the SSCAC. The group already consists of 20 members, and they plan to expand out into other districts countywide.

"We hope to have chapters in high schools throughout Suffolk County to empower the students to act and create change," said Parrott, who noted, "They will meet with their local elected officials, create petitions, and understand that their [voices] can make a difference.

"This is their committee," said Parrott. "I'm here as a mentor to guide them, but to be successful, they have to own it. These kids are ready to make it happen. The Sayville administration has been nothing but supportive, and the goal is for Sayville to be a model for other schools in the fall."

Another key leader in the committee is Sayville sophomore Harrison Bench, who helped recruit many of its current dedicated members. Together, the group was able to persuade Congressman Peter King to join the bipartisan dialogue and become a part of the Climate Solutions Caucus on Capitol Hill.

"It's amazing how quickly we've been able to gain success with the club," said Bench, who has been conducting an environmental research program of his own focusing on soil for the past three years. "Our generation is really going to be the ones who are going to fix this problem, and we've been working non-stop to ensure we're successful because we know how important this is."

Ninety-seven percent of climate scientists agree that man-made climate change is a reality. Carbon pollution is warming our planet and creating weather volatility and extreme droughts, flooding, wildfires and superstorms. Right now, scientists predict that the current rate of carbon emissions will lead to an average increase in global temperatures of 7.2 degrees by the end of the century. The increase will exacerbate currently observable water shortages, droughts of agricultural lands, high tide flooding, extreme temperatures, vector-borne diseases, famine, both human and non-human geographical displacement, and the frequency/volatility of weather-related events. Land temperatures have already

exceeded 140 degrees in some areas of the world, impacting the poor and most vulnerable. Since 1970, New York's average temperature has increased by 4 degrees.

Looking ahead, the SSCAC plans to speak out at the upcoming Islip Town Board meeting next Tuesday to urge officials to get Islip on 100 percent renewable energy/electricity by 2030. They will also be present at the Seatuck Eco-Carnival this Saturday (Earth Day) to promote their message.

"Everyone here is so devoted and committed to the mission," said Bench. "It's so eye-opening and encouraging to see kids coming every week."

"Our motto is that it's better to change the laws than light bulbs," said Gaconnier. "At all of our meetings, you can tell that everyone truly wants to be there. It's extremely motivating."

"I've never seen kids like this," said Parrott. "They're so inspiring. If this is our future, I'll be able to sleep easier at night."

To learn more about the Suffolk Student Climate Action Committee, visit

www.suffolkstudentclimateactioncommittee.weebly.org

(<http://www.suffolkstudentclimateactioncommittee.weebly.org>) or email suffolkstudentclimateaction@gmail.com.

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