

# Social Impact Heroes: Why & How Tara DePorte of 'Human Impacts Institute' Is Helping To Change Our Planet



Yitzi Weiner [Follow](#)  
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I believe we are all experts in our own experience and own life. Once we acknowledge that, we can listen for the expertise of others and see the leadership in people in a multitude of different ways and through different lived experiences. It might be the educator in me, but I see potential in every student and now every person. Not everyone is an expert in everything, everyone knows something true and unique. The best way to be a good leader is through being able to open your eyes to build up and draw out the leadership in others.

**As** *part of my series about “individuals and organizations making an important social impact”, I had the pleasure of interviewing Tara DePorte.*

*Tara founded the Human Impacts Institute in 2010, seeing a need for creative approaches to sustainability and global coalition building. Before starting the Human Impacts institute, Tara worked for 9 years as Director of Environmental Education and as Program Director for a NYC community-based organization — developing opportunities for inner-city youth to learn about, and develop responsibility for, their*

*local environment. She has also served as a global representative of The ClimateRealityProject since 2006, presenting to thousands of people about climate change.*

*With a BA in Human Impacts on Ecosystems from the University of Virginia and a MA in Climate and Society from Columbia University, Tara's formal education has focused on issues of sustainable development, society, and the environment. Professionally, her international experience includes work throughout Latin America, the Caribbean and Europe, working with colleagues throughout the world on creative community development, environmental education, social justice, policy and networking.*

*Tara is also an adjunct professor at Webster University in the Netherlands and has developed and led courses in Environmental Studies, Policy, Sustainable Development and Visual Arts at the New School, Syracuse University and Columbia University.*

*As a visual artist, Tara has exhibited and performed her work in galleries and museums in six countries. Her personal website is [TaraDePorte.com](http://TaraDePorte.com)*

**Thank you so much for doing this with us! Can you tell us a story about what brought you to this specific career path?**

**I**'ve always been interested in finding common ground between climate activism, politics, and art since I was a little girl. I grew up in the D.C. area writing letters to my senator about saving the planet. When I was young, I was also entering art contests and working creatively in the hope of finding multiple ways to express my awe of the environment and act on my love for the planet. This passion for climate activism led me to diverse leadership roles and experiences, including with the United Nations, local not-for-profits, and as an Adjunct Professor at numerous universities.

Additionally, my experience as a former educator with a background in the fields of science and policy allowed me to notice a disconnect: the lack of an effective way to connect the many dedicated and caring individuals seeking to make a difference for climate change and the diverse number of solutions and resources available. To solve that problem, I started the Human Impacts Institute (HII), where I currently serve as Executive Director, which aims to bridge the gap, combine creativity and activism, and truly inspire change through working with some of the most creative and impactful minds of our generation — our artists and culture creators.

**Can you share the most interesting story that happened to you since you began leading your company or organization?**

Before starting the Human Impacts Institute, I kept my artistic side and science-policy side largely separate. In exploring these distinct lanes of my life, I one day thought to challenge other artists to bring the ideas together. I was intrigued by the idea of artists working with climate scientists to find new and exciting ways to get the information out to the community and communicate these issues in a different, more accessible way. Initially, I had feared that encouraging creativity and art in correlation to science and technology might lead to the Human Impact Institute's knowledge not being taken seriously within larger organizations, businesses, and consulates. Thankfully I was wrong, and the art was able to speak volumes, reach diverse groups of people, and strengthen the need for organizations like ours. People crave ways to be inspired and avenues into creative and climate justice, so understanding that linking art and climate activism was not only feasible but incredibly effective was eye-opening.

**Can you describe how you or your organization is making a significant social impact?**

At Human Impacts Institute, we aim to shift the narrative of whom we all acknowledge as leaders, especially on issues like climate and the environment. We create spaces to bring new voices into the room — women, youth, front line communities, communities of color — and amplify their voices. While these communities are often seen as bearing the brunt of our negative climate impact and the most vulnerable, we rarely sufficiently acknowledge their

strength, resiliency, and leadership. We want to share these successes and build community by helping those who are working toward similar goals meet in the same physical or virtual room, often for the first time. Lastly, we root our environmental work in creating healthier communities and ensuring dignity for community members. We want to find ways to not only ensure a healthy planet in the big picture, but also find ways to show how the environment affects us all personally.

**Can you tell us a story about a particular individual who was impacted or helped by your cause?**

I have learned the value and importance of having people and communities share their own stories. While we do work to share and amplify the stories of others, we make sure to do it solely in their own voices. We hope our impact speaks for itself.

**Are there three things the community/society/politicians can do to help you address the root of the problem you are trying to solve?**

The largest point I'd like to make is that when it comes to the climate crisis, we all have a role to play. You don't have to have "environment" in your title and you don't need to be changing your life completely to make an impact — everyone can find a way to play a part. We need to have a way to make the conversation around environmental activism and climate justice more

welcoming. Human Impacts Institute and many similar organizations are working to create space for more diverse voices and leadership to help everyone see themselves in the climate movement.

On a more literal level, we need to phase out fossil fuels. We need to push our politicians to focus on this issue and prioritize a “just transition.” A just transition is rooted in the understanding that we must still find ways to support those who may have once relied on the industry for their livelihood or culture, and we ensure to not continue to place the burden on the workers themselves. Another root problem lies in our society’s consumerism — we must understand that we vote with our dollars when we buy things. In our current capitalist system, we vote with our dollars on how we believe things should be made, where things should be made, the quality we expect, how long we expect them to last, and who makes the products and how much profit is made at each level of a corporation. We can all make a difference by choosing where to spend our money to support more local, sustainable, fair-trade businesses.

**How do you define “Leadership”? Can you explain what you mean or give an example?**

I believe we are all experts in our own experience and own life. Once we acknowledge that, we can listen for the expertise of others and see the leadership in people in a multitude of different

ways and through different lived experiences. It might be the educator in me, but I see potential in every student and now every person. Not everyone is an expert in everything, everyone knows something true and unique. The best way to be a good leader is through being able to open your eyes to build up and draw out the leadership in others.

**What are your “5 things I wish someone told me when I first started” and why. Please share a story or example for each.**

I'd rather speak about one thing I was told when I first started and why I'm glad I didn't listen. I've always been very interdisciplinary and continue to seek connections everywhere I go. I consider myself an “expert-generalist,” which means I can understand much and contribute a little to many different conversations because I am always nurturing knowledge and interest in a number of different fields. In that vein, I've always believed that in order to be a climate organization, we must also address racial justice, poverty, inequities in our systems, and other facets creating the waste and disparities in our environment. Many people have told me that I need to focus on only one thing, but I'm glad that I haven't listened or limited myself and our organization. At the Human Impacts Institute, we understand the importance of exploring the interlinking systems of our world and acknowledging their effect on one another — we can't treat one aspect, particularly an issue like climate change, in a bubble. Nothing happens in a vacuum, so

I'm grateful that I never listened to the advice of others to only focus on one aspect when we live in a complex world.

**You are a person of enormous influence. If you could inspire a movement that would bring the most amount of good to the most amount of people, what would that be? You never know what your idea can trigger. :-)**

For me, it's all about fostering inspiration and sparking action. We have to be creative in the possibilities — who wouldn't want a world with less suffering? Without asthma, without trash on the street, without plastic in fish? I'm excited about pushing forward the innovation and ideas of creative people who care. We are responsible for the world we are creating right now and I envision a fantastic one that we can all create and move towards. We can have jobs and energy that don't give us black lungs and which allows parents to go home and run around with their kids. And we can have all parents feel secure that their child is going to make it home safe from school. If we see our world the way we want it, we can use our optimism and ideas to envision the future. We have to envision a new future, because so much of the trajectory we are on is not working for too many. It's on us.

**Is there a person in the world, or in the US with whom you would like to have a private breakfast or lunch with, and why? He or she might just see this, especially if we tag them. :-)**

I would love to spend time with Michelle Obama, I just think she is amazing. I've been enjoying her book, *Becoming*, and following her journey for years. In essence, I love strong women. I love being surrounded by strong, opinionated women who aren't afraid to challenge themselves and others and who want to make a difference in the world. With Michelle, there's something special about how she states that idea and how she hasn't given up in the face of having to be a first lady, be a mother, and be everything to so many people at once. I look up to her and how she does it — how committed she is to lifting up young girls, veterans, and to bringing people together, even when it's very hard. I'd love to grab a meal with her and learn and listen.

### **How can our readers follow you on social media?**

You can visit the Human Impacts Institute website at <https://www.humanimpactsinstitute.org/>, follow us on [Instagram](#) , [Facebook](#) and Twitter at [@HumanImpacts](#).

**This was very meaningful, thank you so much. We wish you only continued success on your great work!**