

## **Reflections on the Climate Crisis: An Intergenerational Conversation**

Anchored to the grass of his front lawn, the boy watches in awe as the ocean attempts to swallow the street in front of him. The waves rush in response to the storm that just rolled through, tugging at his ankles and submerging the bottom of his pants.

Erwin Isman, who was just ten years old in 1950, recalls his first intense interaction with nature in memory. In addition to the frequent flooding, he remembers the coal fires that would cast a dark haze over his neighborhood. He lived here in Brooklyn's Brighton Beach for the first decade of his life until moving to Queens in the early 1950s. Though the pollution was less severe here, there was not much green space— his playground was a concrete street disrupted by the occasional car. While evident in retrospect, the role of climate change in his life— and his role in it— would not become clear until much later.

Erwin, while recalling his time spent studying Business Administration at the City University of New York, emphasized a lack of education on the environment and its many social intersections. The topic was hardly discussed at a kitchen table, let alone in a lecture hall. Our academic experiences sit in stark contrast: although I too am studying Business Administration, I've been fortunate to do so at the intersection in courses like Environmental Economics. As we discussed this increase in access to information, he expressed his gratitude for the ways in which technology has enabled my generation to learn about the intricacies of climate change. For him, it was through gradual exposure to the impacts of pollution and the burgeoning global climate conversation that he began to grasp the immensity of our situation.

The turning point in his exposure to these issues occurred in the 1970s, after he and his wife Fran had settled in New City, New York. Their new home sat on a hill within a ten mile

radius of Indian Point, a nuclear power station located on the Hudson River. Fueled by lingering Cold War tensions, neighboring towns grew uneasy about a potential attack or mechanical malfunction. In the case of an emergency, twenty-five million people would need to evacuate; however, officials stated that this would be impossible given the state of the lower Hudson Valley's infrastructure. At this same time, his neighbors were reporting—and dying—from various types of cancers. Years later, he learned that the houses at the bottom of his hill were built on top of a dumping ground, which turned into a swamp as runoff pooled in their yards after storms. With the foundations of environmental awareness set, Erwin began a career in garment manufacturing that would illuminate climate change's racial and socioeconomic intersections. On a business trip to North Carolina, Erwin visited a Revlon plant and discovered a nearby river that ran red. He watched in horror as the corporation dumped dyes into the water that flowed through the homes of a low-income community of color. Their voices were ignored by the firm, which priced its products above their lives.

He was frustrated and devastated by the culmination of these events—fear, suffering, and loss shocked so many communities, and he felt defenseless. As these emotions festered, he began to navigate his own involvement in the climate crisis.

Turning to his consumption habits, Erwin explained the regression of sustainability with the rise of industry. Fifty years ago, he received milk and soda in glass bottles that he would return weekly. The age of consumerism quickly pushed an anti-glass rhetoric that swept through communities across the country, upholding plastic containers as the packaging of the future. But now, it fills the oceans, kills the animals, and poisons the food chain—from the bottom up. Single-use plastics, he argues, are a vehicle of convenience for a profit-driven industry—and it has cost us an unimaginable amount of experiences, homes, and lives.

He firmly believes in our moral obligation to care for our shared home. In his youth, this meant strapping on a pair of wading boots to show neighbors the impact of manufacturing on plant and animal life. It has since meant watching documentaries, staying well-informed on global climate news, and sharing this information with those who are not inclined to learn it themselves. For his habits, this translates into limiting consumption, maintaining a composting bin, and recycling appropriate, well-cleaned items. When he researches political candidates— at the local, state, and federal levels— he pays particular attention to the ways in which they approach the climate crisis and other critical social justice issues. He urged me to “vote for the right people, and picket for the right issues.”

When I asked him about the crises that concern him most today, his voice fell as he responded: “there’s just so much more to be worried about.” While the impacts of climate change can be eased, every year that we pass it off to the next congressperson, the next community leader, the next child, we push our planet into certain death. As he looks ahead, he is particularly worried about the ways in which the climate conversation has become fractured as a bitter, partisan issue.

He maintains that each of us holds a certain amount of responsibility, though some— like governments and corporations— have an obligation to do much more. Urging us to lean into public-private partnerships, Erwin believes that these relationships can help us navigate the climate crisis. If we can leverage this synergy, we can maximize efficiency, align incentives, and unify ourselves in an impactful response. Technology, he maintains, will enable us to do this— so long as people commit to using it right, to using it ethically. Instead of writing off environmental policy as too costly, we must reconceptualize the benefits as much more than a financial return on investment— *this is about life and death for so many people.*

After our call ended, I was so overwhelmed with the significance of our conversation that I started to cry. I am so thankful that I got the opportunity to see such a unique part of history through his eyes. This is much more than a school project— this is knowledge-sharing and history-making in action. As we spoke, we weaved our experiences together to create a narrative that stretches across generations. My memory of my hometown was transformed under the weight of his memory of New City, and in this way, we craft a collective history through rememory. I asked him for any closing advice, and he encouraged us to “do all [we] can to heal.” While this can come in an endless amount of forms, we are both confident that there’s much to gain from mending our divide, sharing our experiences, and revitalizing our shared home. As we do so, we break our ties to the problem’s source and transform into the solution.

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In order to better visualize Erwin’s story, I’ve included a map: [Erwin](#)

### Map Highlights

*The first layer is titled “Erwin’s Favorite Places on Earth,” and the pins are displayed in yellow. The second layer tracks the major places that Erwin has lived, and the pins are in light blue. You can click each location in the drop-down menu (left) to read about the place from Erwin’s perspective: these are either memories from his trips or observations about the environmental issues that characterize each place. Note that not every location on this map was discussed in the paper above and that all of the map’s text descriptions are copied below to increase accessibility.*

#### Erwin’s Favorite Places on Earth

##### ★ Jerusalem, Israel

- Jerusalem has cultural importance to Erwin as a site intimately connected with his Jewish heritage. Only able to visit in the past few years, he was disheartened to see that the Dead Sea, the Sea of Galilee, and the Jordan River are shrinking.

★ Grand Canyon, AZ

- He explained that this is the most magnificent site he has ever visited.

★ Killeen, TX

- His time here was “half honey-moon, half-job.” During his summer here, he experienced a cicada plague: one morning before heading to the army base, he had to shovel them to get into his car. Overall, the summers were intensely hot, sometimes reaching the 94 degree threshold before the morning was over. At this point, everyone was sent home from base for fear of heat stroke. Lastly, he experienced a “Blue Norther,” a weather phenomenon when the sky turns dark blue as the temperatures drop and a storm rolls across the flat plains.

★ Lake Como, Italy

- He recalls a time when he and Fran watched in awe out of a Juliet balcony as an intense thunder and lightning storm rumbled through the mountains.

★ Hong Kong

- Hong Kong is “absolutely wonderful” with stunning tourist areas. In regards to the environment, Hong Kong experiences many issues related to chronic overcrowding.

★ Tokyo

- While Erwin was on a business trip here, Fran was given several cards with places around the city: one side had a picture with the site in English, and the other side was in Japanese. She spent the trip exploring the beautiful city by showing cab drivers the cards.

★ Venice

- Venice is “gorgeous.” He remembers how St.Mark's Square floods after a heavy rainfall, as the city struggles to control the rising water table.

★ Paris

- He loves the “City of Lights.” He appreciates the excellent city planning, which involves mostly sheltered walkways to keep the rain and sun off pedestrians.

Where Erwin Has Called Home

★ Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, NY

- He called Brooklyn his home from 1941-1950, where the ocean would flood his street after intense storms.

★ Queens, NY

- Queens is where he and Fran met and married. They lived here from 1950 – 1968. Here, they experienced less pollution as compared to their time in Brooklyn, where she had also lived originally.

★ City University of New York

- Erwin earned a degree in Business Administration from 1957-1961. Here, he did not receive any formal education on environmental issues; however, his degree would prepare him to promote sustainable business practices later in life.

★ Fort Hood, TX

- From 1961-1962, Erwin served in the army at Fort Hood, Texas. He was then in the army reserves for two additional years until 1964. The army base was surrounded by flat plains and desert brush. Texas was spread out, vastly different from his previous homes in New York.

★ Plainview, Long Island

- This was their first time living with a large lawn with hedges, trees, and plants to tend to. They lived here from 1968-1974 and raised their three children.

★ New City, NY

- Erwin and Fran were exposed to a wealth of environmental issues (mostly surrounding development) once moving to New City, NY, where they lived from 1974– 2005.

★ Fort Lee, NJ

- Today, he and Fran reside in Fort Lee, NJ. On some days, they can see smoke stacks from Newark blowing over the Hudson.