

**Hayley Brackenridge 0:17**

Hello and welcome to Episode Four of Establish a podcast brought to you by Shake up the Establishment. Shake up the Establishment is a youth-led registered national nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that operates within the geographical confines of what is currently known as Canada. This episode was produced on Treaty Three land.

In part one of this episode, Shake up the Estab president Manvi Bhalla sits down with fellow activists, Alienor Rougeot, and Payton Mitchell to discuss their origin stories, imposter syndrome and the power dynamics in volunteer spaces.

**Manvi Bhalla 0:55**

So I guess for starters, I think everybody would love to know how both of you got started in this work.

**Hayley Brackenridge 1:01**

If you didn't already recognize her voice, that was Manvi, the President and co-founder of Shake up the Establishment. Manvi is also the co-founder and director of the national not for profit organization Misinformed and the steering committee chair for the Environmental Noxiousness, Racial Inequalities and Community Health project also known as the ENRICH project. Manvi has been recognized for her activism by Starfish's 2020 Top 25 Environmentalists under 25, and Corporate Knight's 2020 Top 30 under 30 Sustainability Leaders

**Payton Mitchell 1:35**

I always thought it's such a difficult question like how did you get started in activism because there's so many, because it's like what is activism right?

**Hayley Brackenridge 1:43**

That was Payton Mitchell. Payton is a founding member of the grassroots climate strike groups Climate Strike Canada and La Coalition étudiante pour un virage environnemental et social, better known by its acronym La CEVES. Payton is currently the mobilization coordinator for the Arts and Science Federation of Associations, at Concordia University.

**Payton Mitchell 2:05**

There's so many different ways and like different little things that people can do to sort of, like be an activist. Especially when you're young and like kind of like move in and out of doing different work. But when I really started to, like, earnestly get involved in activism in a very like planned kind of strategic sort of way that I was, like, really intentional about it, was in 2019. I actually started doing activism to get over a breakup that I had just had, and I was making a list of things that I wanted to do with all this new free time that I had. And one of those things was that I was really, really environmentally conscious when I was younger, but then because I was kind of, you know, caught up in being in a relationship and things like that, and being just kind of like an older teenager, early 20s sort of person, you, you can lose that. And so it was something that I'd been kind of telling myself I would do when I finished school and I had gotten my education. But with all the climate strikes that were going on, and this, you know, new, new, newfound free time that I had, I decided I was going to start putting a lot of my work into that. So I actually ended up going to a conference called Power Shift that took place in Ottawa, in 2019. And it was organized by a bunch of different nonprofits. I think some unions were involved in organizing it. And it was essentially a space just to bring together a bunch of young people from across Canada, who were already doing work in environmentalism, or who wanted to be doing work and environmentalism. And so I was lucky enough to get to go on, I was able to go there through my

work because I worked for a labor organization. And they wanted somebody to kind of report on what was going on with this conference. And while I was there, I met a lot of great activists from McGill, met this really amazing woman Alison Gu, who has just won, to be on Burnaby Municipal Council, and she's a really exciting climate organizer who was based in McGill. So we carpoled back to Montreal together on the Sunday and by Tuesday, we were organizing climate strikes at our like, respective universities. And we were getting into contact with like the Francophone universities in Montreal and in Quebec as well so since then, it's just been like nonstop, since like end of February 2019.

#### **Manvi Bhalla 4:20**

I love hearing stories like this, like I think that it's so honest. I think what you said about how activism is not, like this like linear path. It really is different for every single person, there's a different point of entry. I actually really thought yours was really cool. I think it's a really fun way to start off the story to say it was kind of like, you as an independent woman were like, "Well, I have all this free time let me use it to like better my like life and the life of those around me." So that's a really cool thing to kind of take away from a breakup.

#### **Hayley Brackenridge 4:50**

Next we'll hear from Alienor Rougeot. Allie is an organizer with Fridays for Future's Toronto chapter. She led school climate strikes over the past few years, including Toronto' biggest Climate Strike in September 2019, which saw more than 20,000 participants in downtown Toronto and made waves for the climate justice movement nationally. Allie works in the nonprofit sector, pushing for a fair transition towards a just and sustainable economy for workers and communities in what is currently Canada. Allie has been recognized for her incredible work by Starfish's 2020 Top 25 Environmentalists under 25, Corporate Knight's 2019 Top 30 Under 30 Sustainability Leaders and as an agent of change by Toronto Life magazine.

#### **Alienor Rougeot 5:32**

I think similarly to Payton, it's hard to pinpoint when because I think especially those of us that kind of have it in us to just protest things and voice our opinions when we're concerned. It started whenever we were able to speak. And so really, there's no day that I started being an activist, but I really started doing some sort of advocacy work around the age of 10. And that was just from being a little nerd as a kid and reading a lot of books about science and biodiversity loss. And I was so concerned I was like it's so concerning that the corals are like suffering and that these strange insects are like not going to be in our ecosystems anymore. And so I started just every school project I had, I was like, I'm going to talk about it. And then the librarian, the school librarian was like, this kid looks like she has a lot of stuff to say. So she like started allowing me to like put posters up and give presentations there. And I think like that's very, like tiny scale advocacy. The one thing that it kind of taught me was like, when you start speaking out, other people will, will kind of like start listening and get interested. And it was just a very interesting feedback where right away like people started being interested. And so, the next step was me kind of like researching it more and around, you know, middle school, and especially getting a little older into middle school, I started wanting to do that same kind of speaking out, but on the issues that were most important to me at that time. And so there were two that would stick out. One was women's rights, and especially women's reproductive rights. And so I volunteered a lot with Amnesty International back in France, where I was at that time, around, you know, advocating for women's reproductive rights, especially in other parts of Europe, where that was not at all the norm to have control over one's body when you're a woman. And then the other big one that came around the end of my middle school, beginning of high school was refugee rights, because I lived near the Mediterranean Sea, and we had refugees arriving from Syria, mostly,

and North Africa, and the European Union, essentially, just not taking any responsibility for welcoming the people arriving. And so again, mostly through Amnesty, it was just kind of taking that next step. And that was a really great experience, because it allowed me to, you know, create my local, like, I created my local chapter, and I had all of that, but I still had resources that were being sent by Amnesty. And I had like guidelines, like I didn't have to make up my demands. And so that was a very good training ground. And at the time, I also wasn't, you know, a spokesperson for anything, or I wasn't really doing anything like in the media. And again, that was very good training ground because that gave me the time to organize before speaking out, before doing anything that makes you in that position where you have to be very strong on what you believe, and very yeah, I guess very confident that that public position is one that you're able to keep, and I'm really grateful now that high school me didn't have to be put in front of a TV because that would have just kind of stayed forever. And so kind of being in that space of women's rights, refugee rights, you hear about climate change, because you know, that, you know, those folks are going to be disproportionately affected. And so it just kinda became a concern. And when I moved to Toronto, I wanted to get involved right away, and I tried on campus, and I was a part of all the sustainability groups on campus and that honestly felt so counterproductive and such a waste of time. You were speaking to an elite that like didn't care or already knew, or it was just like trying to get recycling bins in a university that should have had recycling bins a long time ago. And so all of that made me angry, and then I just got in touch with some local folks that were also interested in creating a Fridays for Future Toronto, and we created it! And so, that very long story was just to say that step-by-step I just kind of stepped up until I got into a role that was the Fridays for Future organizing role.

**Manvi Bhalla 9:27**

Yeah, really interesting. Allie what's interesting is that I think I have a very similar story to you. So it's kind of cool to hear you. Yeah, I started when I was like 10 as well. I lived in Hamilton at the time and all the schools had a social justice Film Festival and I'm a huge nerd and always have been, a huge reader, and I think a lot of that has to do with like my ADHD like I hyper-focus on things like you know, and I just kind of focus in and just things that are exciting to me and like learning is always new stuff. So it's easy to hyperfocus because you get excited it's a new stimulus. So I knew so much about random stuff. My mom was like, you should do this. Like you know, you have a lot of energy, like let's direct it. And she helped me make this really, like I don't even, I hope it's not available anymore, um, film - basically I came like in second place and I realized that I loved sharing my thoughts about stuff that I've learned about, and I just knew that also alongside kind of that I knew that I enjoyed learning about different people's lives and you know, even my own life. like we emigrated to Canada when I was three I think, and I lived in downtown Toronto and I lived in like the one of the poorest regions of Toronto where all the new immigrants live and so my lived experiences from there moving to a bit of a higher socio-economic, like not so like hugely different, but just like from low income to like more middle income, you see huge difference and your like perspectives of the world and like my education changed and so many parts of my life change and I, as a kid, I think the only reason I was able to kind of see those and notice those changes so overtly was because of all this like learning I'd done about how people in different continents live differently and you know, just this kind of experience and exposure I guess, to just different issues in situations like global learning, being a global citizen. And then I, I just ever since that after that point onwards, like grade five, or grade six onwards, I just always was involved in groups. And I was just always learning and in undergrad I was the president of the Guelph chapter of Oxfam, which is an international anti-poverty organization, it's a feminist organization. All the work is is like different issues like violence against women and like health inequities, food insecurity, sustainable agriculture, but all of it takes us some sort of like a feminist lens and kind of centers anti-poverty, so a lot of it is

really cool because it connects the issues like you said, you know, and then climate became obvious to me as one of those, this interconnected issue that's going to impact all of those things so greatly that by by you working to address both those issues and climate, that's like the best thing we can do right now, we can't do any one alone. And so then, towards the end of my undergrad, I felt like I had enough experience to kind of found Shake Up the Establishment, but as Payton will know, when we first founded it we had no intention of being, you know, in this position, we really just thought we'd be around for the federal election. And then it just became a place where young people felt safe to work on stuff, and had resources to do so, and had like leadership that was like their peers. So it was just like, a really relaxed environment to just do whatever you want to do, and not have that sort of supervisory capacity of like an older person who kind of might not see the urgency of the risk, like the language that young people use is so unique and the environments we feel safe in, and particularly racialized, young women in particular, you know SUTE is mostly women, and so many of them are racialized. And so, just creating a safe haven for people to be like authentic activists and not tone down their voices, like that was something that came about by mistake. So it's interesting, like how you kind of get to where you're going, but you start off in such a different place. And I think it's cool how all of us can see the interconnectedness of different issues.

So, our next line of questioning is surrounding challenges that you might have experienced. Because we talked about how we got here, and let's be honest, it's not, not always the easiest road I'm sure there is experiences that we've all had. We'd love to hear them. I guess Allie, maybe you can kick it off and just like let us know of some of the things that you've experienced that maybe have helped you grow, or lessons learned.

### **Alienor Rougeout 13:33**

The reality of my activism life is that I come from a very privileged background and so I never had for example a financial barrier to me not working on the side and so I could do activism and so that's just the reality that made my whole experience way way easier than most people. And also my parents were largely supportive. I mean they weren't ecstatic at the idea of like me blocking stuff but they were you know, never opposed to it either. And so I think again, huge, huge privilege because I didn't feel like I had to hide it or I had to do anything like that. Um, now in terms of things that did kind of hold me back or things that were a little difficult, definitely finding feeling legitimate on these topics because obviously, you know a lot of us and perhaps that's a woman's trade or perhaps it's just a youth trade, a little bit of both, you never feel like fully legitimate to be asking you know, politicians who you assume are super educated and super you know, well versed in these things you feel like "am I really the one that's going to tell them what to do?" and so it took a while for me to say you know what, no, this is you know, you you are you are informed first of all, and what you're not informed on, you still are allowed to have opinions on things. So that kind of took me a while to understand that. And the second was actually accept leadership, because I had always kind of ended up being put into leadership positions, but because I had been put in them like nominated or kind of like asked to kind of how them I never really know how to ask whether I could take leadership and it was just always like, Oh, this you know, other person that has more authority than me gave me this responsibility. And so it was kind of cut out for me that I could take it, it's fine. So when I said it, and so when at Friday's for future, I had to kind of affirm like, I think there's a reason I should continue to coordinate this, like, I think I have the experience, I think I have the like the the wisdom that is needed right now for the group, it felt hard because it felt like am I power grabbing? So there was a lot of going back and forth, like between being a reasonable person and lending space to others, and also okay, but I do have relevant experience. So kind of going back and forth with that were a bit of the challenges that I've felt. Going into a few of just at least one I think of the big mess ups that I

think I definitely had, when I when I started doing this work, is that the background I had to activism was intersectional, but then when I started focusing on climate, for a moment, I focused too much on the climate. And I almost forgot that I came to this because of the refugee rights movement. And so for a while, I think I would mention, you know, other demands, but I didn't really embody them. Like I really didn't, if you looked at my feed or if you looked at my the campaigns we did they were still mostly like carbon emissions focused. And it really took a few wake up calls of some of some folks, and especially racialized folks, in the movement being like, hey, perhaps you should be a little more intersection, or you know, hey, you're saying this, but it's not really showing up afterwards. And those were hard. At some point, I was like, Am I a bad person? And then I realized what would make me a bad person was dismissing them. So I just kind of, you know, put my ego aside and was like, yeah, let's redo this properly. But that was one of my I would say main mess ups was just like, forgetting completely what even brought me there.

### **Manvi Bhalla 17:02**

Yeah, that's really interesting. Something that I really resonated with, and I'm sure Payton you'll have some thoughts on as well, but I think the imposter syndrome stuff is something that most young people can relate to. And I think a lot of women especially. I have had the same experiences with leadership. I feel like a lot of the time, it just naturally somehow transgressed in my direction. Maybe I, maybe I'm just more vocal, and you know, maybe I come off as more passionate, and people just assume that I wanted it. And then it got to a point where even with founding SUTE, like people look to me for direction, and I always feel like am I just like dictating what's going to happen? And am I overstepping? Should I be like chilling a little bit and like letting people? and like, there's this like, great balance this, like tiptoe of like, how much space can I take up without taking up too much space. And then on top of it, I'm a person that honestly I'm depressed a lot. So I don't like taking up space. So it's this very, like weird situation where I really don't feel so self important. And then people put me in that position. And I have this like, really interesting paradigm where I just don't even know the answers. But something that I can say is that the more experience you have, and the people that you work with make a big difference. But the more experience you have almost like the more comfortable you get, and you start owning space, and you start realizing that if people have an issue, they should speak up. And if they were in, if I was in their position, and I had leadership and I had an issue, I would speak up. And I hope that you foster a safe enough space, that there is room for feedback always. And that it's like even though you're the leader, like you are such an approachable person, you are a person that centers the community over your own self-interest. And in that way, people are able to approach you and be like, hey, I think this is misguided. And then they know you're not gonna take it personally because your values align with the greater impact. You know, and I think that, like actions that lead to the greater impacts, that's a really interesting thing.

### **Payton Mitchell 18:50**

I think the challenge of imposter syndrome or feeling, feeling like you don't necessarily have like the right to speak on certain issues is for sure, something that I struggled with, especially being an Ontarian and studying in Quebec, and doing political activism in Quebec, who doesn't speak French, I've been really hyper aware of, to some degree, I am an imposter in this space because I can't fully participate in the culture and I don't intend to stay here. And so I found it interesting kind of balancing that, in the sense that like, I do have a right to be in the space as like a representative of my university and as somebody who goes to Concordia, but that is contingent on the fact that a lot of the people at that university like aren't staying in the area and won't be staying in the province, there's a lot of international students, lots of out of province students, lots

of even like Anglophone Quebec students who often like leave the province afterwards, if their French isn't strong enough. So that was definitely an interesting, it was a really interesting aspect of my getting involved, especially because I was, I was the only Anglophone who was involved in CEVES from the beginning. And so I would sit in meetings that were completely in French and I would, somebody would be typing minutes live, and I would google translate them quickly. And so I would have like a tab of the Google Doc. And then I'd have a tab with Google Translate. And I would just be, I would be three beats behind everything, which was kind of, it was kind of like a really good way for me to get over like being wrong. And because I still needed to say what I needed to say, otherwise, like, what was the point of me being there? So there was a lot of times where like, I would make statements that like, I actually didn't understand the conversation, and I'm just going off. And then I would just have to be like, I still have to work with these people, right, I can't be embarrassed and leave. So you kind of have to, like move through doing things like that, like silly things like that. And other times, just like not knowing what was going on. But yeah, it was, it was really a great way to build relationships, and to build, build, like an internal understanding of like, Where, where you see yourself as like how much space you should take up. I think, especially as a white woman, that's something that we need to always be considering. Because you can get into a brain space where you're like, I'm a woman, and so I need to be taking space. But it's like, okay, well who else is here, because you don't always need to be taking up that space. So it's something that is really, really contingent on the situation, you're never going to know, there's no like, easy answer as to like how much space you can take up in a given moment, it's never going to be the same. And also, sometimes you'll get criticisms about taking up too much space that are complete bullshit. And it's people with sore egos, or who are overwhelmed by just sort of like the energy that you're bringing, and who don't want to deal with it. And it's not necessarily that you're taking up too much space, it's just that people don't want to listen to you. I found like with the leadership aspect, because there's taking space, and then there's taking leadership, which is, which go, they go hand in hand, but they're not necessarily the same thing, right? Like you can take up space and not be a leader in a meeting. You can completely derail a meeting, or you can completely like add and like, just inject tons of new, great ideas into a meeting by taking up space and not have any sort of leadership position there. But taking leadership and the criticisms that come with taking leadership in like student-run youth organizations, where we, like we're trying really hard to be non-hierarchical. But then there's confusion as to like, what does non-hierarchy actually mean? And how is it carried out? When Allie mentioned power earlier and struggles with power, it reminded me of just challenges that we faced when we were first starting with, like building Climate Strike Canada, right, and like building up a structure there, and building up a structure in CEVES, and then in like the campus group that was sort of like, it was almost like a federation style that we had for climate organizing. So, it was really interesting, because people didn't necessarily want to have like positions or like any sort of structure, because any structure to people felt like a hierarchy. And it felt like somebody would be trying to climb power, which, first of all, most people don't generally like choose like volunteer positions as places to like, take power. Sometimes they do. Like, that's something that does happen. But I think sometimes there's a hyper vigilance there. But what's really important to me, like as, as a, as a woman, as somebody who tries to do like a lot of work in like anti-oppression, anti-oppressive frameworks in like doing organizing, is that if power isn't named, and defined, then people who have social power, take that power, and you can't call it out. Because they're, they don't actually have that power. And you can really like, if you're in a space with, for example, like I do a lot of organizing on university campuses, and I'm a mobilization coordinator at my student union. And so, when you have a group of students, and people aren't wanting to have any sort of like, strong structure, like implement, not necessarily a hierarchy, but like a way that we're going to enforce decision making, we can have like, for example, like, white students not wanting to have that structure, but then they can take up a lot of space. And

because we're comfortable in our whiteness, and we're comfortable in these campus spaces, we're able to take that space, and then we just have the power over those conversations. So naming power, I think it's really important. And we need to kind of remove the stigma of like power being bad. Especially when we talk to other like, activists, especially other women activists, about things like running for government, and stuff like that, because it's not it doesn't make somebody a bad person to want to run for government or to be involved in politics, when, you know, who else is going to be there, right?

**Manvi Bhalla 24:35**

Payton I really, really just, I was snapping. Because I thought that was really cool. I think that first of all, like, it's interesting that you say, and I agree, I've seen this in my experience as well, that like the more horizontal your structure, the more democratic it's perceived as. But what's funny is that there isn't a democratic element to it, because the purpose of democracy is to kind of elect leaders that represent your opinions you know, in many ways. And then so in that way, too, I think you're underlining that there is a lack of accountability in horizontal structure. Sometimes, if there's too much horizontal-ness and there isn't clear distinctions between people's responsibilities and accountability measures. And you're totally right. Like in my experience with EDI, wherever there's ambiguity, there's oppression. And so in spaces, like you're saying, you know, where we don't label it as it is, we don't call call the shots as they as they come, we're actually doing a disservice to people because we're not allowing for there to be accountability measures in place when people do take on those unprescribed roles. Like they don't officially have a title, but they're the loudest person in the room. But I'm just thinking, you know, in terms of like, how do we make places with hierarchies better, and I think that starts with creating a safe space where people's values are seen as like, equally as important, everybody's considered equally as intelligent. But we all have different skill sets. And we're working within those skill sets to come to the same goal. And with that comes, some people have added responsibility for, you know, related to overseeing operations, or whatever. And that's their skill set. But we're all smart, and we all have contributions to make. And I think that's really cool.

**Alienor Rougeout 26:09**

I think your points have been brilliant. And I think for us, it's been interesting, because we've been asked every single time at Fridays for Future, how you function without an official structure. And a lot of the time it's been, we have actually, we've had coordinators, and we've had different coordinators, but we actually haven't had perhaps the democratic looking structure that other groups actually decided to have. Those folks have all been nominated, often self-nominated with an approval of the group after instead of like, elections and things like that. And so from the outside, we've often been told, okay, well, so that means like, you were never like, elected and like campaigning and then you were kind of chosen, you just kind of put yourself then people said yes or no. And like to some that seems less democratic, but in a way, it actually for us has always functioned better, because, I think you were kind of hinting at that as well Payton, when you have that explicit role, and you've kind of also put yourself there, which means you've also, you've also prepared yourself for the responsibility, then you're, you're most likely also to do it better, and to kind of live up to those responsibilities. And I think at the end, like we're also in a movement that's supposed to create change. And so if you like, eyes on the prize, you have to remember that you do want to function in the most efficient way as well. That doesn't mean it has to be an oppressive way. But you also have to remember, making everybody happy in the present moment, sometimes will make sure that we just don't succeed as a movement. And so you have to have that balance between like, okay, what seems to work, and then what theoretically we wish worked, you know, and maybe we wished we had all a big round table, and all of us contributed in this way, and it just flowed. But the reality is that that's not, that's not our

experience with groups. And so again, like, if you remember what you're trying to achieve, then maybe try to find the model that works best for that, instead of just saying, I read that hierarchy is never good. So we're never going to have that. And then the last point is, I never thought I would appreciate having someone kind of like telling me what to do, because I was always wanting to be in those leadership roles or been put in those leadership roles. And then I started a job with people much more experienced than I was. And now I love it when my boss actually tells me, this is not how I would have done things because I'm like, yes, and your points make sense. And so I also realize now why some people do ask me sometimes to take leadership, because I now ask someone else to do it. And I realize I don't feel oppressed when my boss tells me, they wouldn't do it that way. I feel guided, and I feel supported. And I feel like I'm not wasting everybody's time. And so sometimes, again, if there's a reason someone is in that position, they've kind of worked themselves to it.

**Payton Mitchell 28:52**

I think that's such an interesting point, Allie, and it reminds me a lot of this book that I've been reading this summer, it's called *Becoming an Ally*, and it's by Anne Bishop. And it's about like, it's called, it's about breaking cycles of oppression and people like within the Canadian context. And so I found it really interesting. And in this book, they talked about like, kind of like these two different concepts of power, which is like "power over" versus "power with". And so I find sometimes when we have elected officials, especially in kind of organization settings, it can give a false sense of power over that, because you were elected, you have power over the group now. And it can be a false sense that comes from the group that that's what they associate an election with. And then that's how they respond to you know, that individual that this person has power over me, and I should be like, critical of them, like hypercritical of them. Or it comes from the person who was elected where it's like I was given the right to do whatever the hell I want by the people who elected me, which is really problematic for a number of reasons. And it's a huge issue we run into in like the Student Union space where we have these department-wide elections with very low participation, right? Like not a lot of people vote in these elections. But then we have executives who then will move as if, you know, they can do whatever they want. But then there's in this book they also talk about this concept of "power with", which I think leads a lot more into kind of Allie how you were saying Fridays for Future Toronto organizes your group meetings and like, giving people kind of leadership or power where it's a guidance. It's I'm volunteering, that I have the capacity at the time to take the lead on this project, and to like, offer any sort of guidance to other people who want to work on this project. And to, you know and it's an agreement that we all have together - rather than framing the person even getting any power as a competition to begin with, I think it kind of like reframes the entire way that you then work with that person who's holding that, that so-called power, which is often really just kind of responsibility, at least in the ways that we've worked in climates, right, Canada and in CEVES as well, that it's really kind of identifying the person as like a point person or a person responsible to sort of like dissuade that notion.

**Manvi Bhalla 31:03**

Yeah, absolutely.

**Hayley Brackenridge 31:14**

Thank you for listening to part one of Episode 4 of Establish. Establish is funded by the Jane Goodall Institute of Canada. This episode was produced by me, Hayley Brackenridge, and transcribed by Acacia Markov. Music was provided by Greg Markov. Thank you to this episode's guests Manvi, Allie and Payton. The conversation will continue in part two - so subscribe, review and stay tuned for part two!