

The 30 Top Thinkers Under 30: Mary-Pat Hector

The top young thinkers in economics, education, political science, and more
By NATALYA SAVKA MARCH 16, 2016



MARY-PAT HECTOR

18, Civil Rights Activism

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Mary-Pat Hector became an anti-violence activist at the age of nine. At 13, she launched Just Think Twice, a campaign to convince youths to think twice before picking up a gun. To spread her message, Hector installed 65 billboards and spoke to 6,000 kids at schools across the country.

Mary-Pat Hector became an anti-violence activist at the age of nine. At 13, she launched Just Think Twice, a campaign that aims to convince youth to think twice before picking up a gun. To spread her message, Hector installed 65 billboards in her hometown of Atlanta and spoke to more than 6,000 kids at schools, churches, and conferences across the country.

Hector now serves as youth leader to the civil rights organization National Action Network. Recently, she and several dozen fellow young activists took to street corners in

west Atlanta to bring attention to their neighborhood's uptick in violent crimes. As part of their Occupy the Corners campaign, they demonstrated outside for two days, under a chilly rain.

Hector balances her activist work with a full class schedule at Spelman College, where she also serves as her class president. At 3:45 one morning, she tweeted: "Just finished studying. Class in five hours." She says she's determined to ace her political science courses in preparation for her future presidential run. ("Look out for me in 2044!" she tells me.)

Hector says she would welcome a chance to sit down with all the 2016 presidential candidates on behalf of young voters. As a young woman who attends more funerals than graduations, Hector wants to ask the candidates what they plan to do about gun violence. She also wants to remind them that young people like her are worth listening to. "They should start seeing us as assets, not as liabilities," Hector says.

Hector attributes her early interest in activism to her sense of compassion, which she thinks she inherited from her mother. "My mom was always doing some sort of community service—cooking for kids at the teen center, volunteering for hurricane-relief work, collecting shoes for donation drives. From a young age, I understood that caring for other people is what you're supposed to do," Hector says.

Hector's mom always supported her ambitious campaign ideas, even as she pushed Hector to improve on those ideas. For instance, when 13-year-old Hector proposed using billboards to raise awareness about gun violence, her mom encouraged her to research what kinds of images would best persuade her target audience. Heeding her mother's advice, Hector conducted a focus group. She sought out participants from several demographics, including the one that she felt needed to hear her message most: young men with a criminal history. Through her research, Hector learned that many young men "didn't even flinch" when shown images of dead bodies. However, photographs of "middle-aged women crying over coffins" gave them pause. Hector wouldn't quit trying to make sense of this finding until she thought she understood: Just like her, these boys loved their mothers more than anything.