



The 30 Top Thinkers Under 30: Jonathan Ferrer

The top young thinkers in economics, education, political science, and more
NATALYA SAVKA MAR 11, 2016



JONATHAN FERRER
20, Environmental Activism

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Jonathan Ferrer is an accomplished activist and one of New York's preeminent youth leaders. He helps organize the annual Climate Justice Youth Summit and has campaigned impressively for clean energy. At his first speech, Ferrer was jazzed that people were ready to listen to "this young Puerto Rican kid from Sunset Park."

"When I was a kid, I didn't think I'd be doing any of what I'm doing right now," Jonathan Ferrer says.

Today, Ferrer is an accomplished environmental activist and one of New York City's preeminent youth leaders. He helps organize the city's annual Climate Justice Youth Summit, which educates and inspires hundreds of young people about local environmental and social issues. Ferrer also facilitates community meetings that address the environmental burdens of Sunset Park, his neighborhood in Brooklyn. He has helped his community establish a waterfront park, install an expanded median on a main thoroughfare, and recover from Hurricane Sandy.

But just six years ago, Ferrer was a "self-absorbed 14-year-old who had the attention span of a squirrel when it came to climate change and was crazy-obsessed with sneakers," he says. His life changed when he became involved with the United Puerto Rican Organization of Sunset Park, which promotes social and environmental justice. Ferrer joined UPROSE because it offered a summer apprenticeship, and because the salary—via the New York City Summer Youth Employment Program—paid more than McDonald's. (Ferrer was saving up for a new pair of Jordans.)

Before the apprenticeship, Ferrer simply thought of the Sunset Park neighborhood as home. "It was the farthest I ever traveled when I went somewhere special with my mom," he says. At the time, Ferrer considered the nearby power plants to be "just these old, weird things." Political consciousness, it turns out, was right around the corner.

It was the executive director of UPROSE, Elizabeth Yeampierre, who inspired Ferrer to think more critically about his neighborhood. One day, Yeampierre asked a room of 30 interns, "How many of you have asthma, or have a family member with asthma?" Sixteen people raised their hands, including Ferrer, who had been hospitalized twice for asthma attacks. Yeampierre explained the cause of the neighborhood's abnormally high asthma rate by pointing to the many industrial sites in and around Sunset Park: the sludge-transfer facility, the highway that carries 200,000 vehicles per day, and the three large power plants that serve other, richer neighborhoods that don't allow industry in their backyards.

"When I found out that the little bit of smoke that I saw coming out of the power plant near my house has such an enormous effect on the health of my neighborhood, I was shocked," Ferrer says. "I don't want to say that it was like finding out that Santa Claus wasn't real all over again, because that's cliché, but that is how it felt."

Later that year, Yeampierre challenged Ferrer to present a speech to city officials at a community forum. The speech proposed a policy that ensured that underserved communities like Sunset Park wouldn't get stuck with yet another power plant or waste facility.

Ferrer wasn't wild about the idea of giving a speech. "I'd never done public speaking before. I never even raised my hand in school," he says. But Ferrer respected Yeampierre too much to refuse. For 30 torturous seconds, Ferrer "choked and stuttered" through the speech, he says.

And then something amazing happened: The audience stood and clapped.

"Here was this young Puerto Rican kid from Sunset Park with such a typical background for a person of color—daddy wasn't around, mma was working her butt off all the time—and a bunch of important people were clapping for him," Ferrer reflects. Ferrer was used to officials looking sleepy at community forums. But after his speech, everyone appeared wide-eyed and smiley, as if they were suddenly ready for change.

That was the moment Ferrer's life's trajectory changed, he says. Now Ferrer is one of UPROSE's most dedicated volunteers, and a winner of the Brower Youth Award and the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes. For Ferrer, it's Yeampierre who changed everything, and he thanks her "very, very, very much."
