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Interview with Tylor Middlestadt

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Tylor Middlestadt

INTERVIEW WITH TYLOR MIDDLESTADT

ASI Executive Vice President

Tylor Middlestadt is a 4th year Architectural Engineering student, this year's Vice President of Associated Students, Inc., and an avid advocate and grassroots activist for environmental sustainability. Tylor was a founding member of the CSU chapter of the California Student Sustainability Coalition, the RenewCSU campaign for a clean energy CSU, and Energy Action, a national student and youth coalition united for a clean energy future. Aside from activism and leadership, Tylor writes and performs Slam poetry, and is a singer/songwriter guitarist.

CT: *How would you define sustainability?*

TM: Sustainability is an all-encompassing catch phrase for responsible decision making with respect to the environment, ecology, social welfare and social equity. There's a tripod metaphor. Picture a triangle and the top is environmental responsibility, the bottom left is social equity, and the bottom right is economic responsibility. Sustainability is the fusion of all different schools of thought towards the one purpose of preserving the environment and our future.

CT: *Is one aspect of this triangle metaphor more important than the others?*

TM: I don't think that one aspect is more important than the others. I think that the concept is a failed effort if all three are not given equal consideration. I attended the Bioneers conference, which is basically an international conference that promotes visionary and practical environmental and social solutions for restoring the Earth and its peoples. Paul Hawken, the author of *The Ecology of Commerce and Natural Capitalism* was a speaker there, and he made the point that all social movements throughout history are related to one of these three areas of the triangle. So, although these groups may have had an effective movement for the one goal they were trying to accomplish, they could have been much more effective and far-reaching had they encompassed the full triad of sustainability.

CT: *So the environment, economy, and society are interdependent?*

TM: Yes. For example, when you are doing an economic analysis, you shouldn't just talk about dollar figures and dollar returns. You should be talking about environmental costs and environmental returns as well as social costs and social returns. Every economic policy has social and environmental ramifications.

CT: How does sustainability affect us?

TM: If we keep ignoring environmental issues, we're going to pay for it in the future. Sustainability makes you conscious of your behavior. So, once you decide to try to live in a sustainable fashion, you have to really acknowledge your lifestyle behaviors. For instance, you have to ask yourself questions such as, "Do I need to drive to school? Are there other alternatives? Should I start riding a bike instead?" You have to ask yourself a lot of questions, and so, getting involved in the sustainability movement is a huge experience in personal growth because it forces people to be responsible for who they are and for the consequences of their existence. This is a movement that really reinforces the fact that change starts from within.

CT: Will we witness any of the effects of the sustainability movement during our lifetimes?

TM: I think we're already seeing its effects. Several movements now are looking at improving the future by joining forces with environmental movements, and they're realizing that we all share common goals of equity, economy, and ecology. It's all inter-related.

CT: So what are some goals of the sustainability movement?

TM: An overarching goal of the movement is to encourage people not only to be aware of the issues that are affecting us now and will affect us in the future, but also to become responsible for personal behavior. Be conscious of what your life is doing to all the life systems around you.

CT: Do you think people are informed about sustainability?

TM: No, in general I don't think they are. Overall, it's a systematic problem in our culture. We live in a pretty selfish culture. People care more about instant gratification in the form of money or status. People don't really stop to think about the ground they're walking on, or where the water we drink comes from. Our culture doesn't promote this type of awareness. Also, our education doesn't promote it either. If you look at the K-12 curriculum, it is largely focused on an ethnocentric history of colonization and great conquerors, but it doesn't teach students about indigenous cultures that care about the environment and preservation and about the value of our natural resources. And unfortunately, it's just not a "cool" thing to be informed about. I heard a statistic the other day that the average adolescent between the ages of eight and twelve has over 1,200 corporate logos memorized. But do you think they know the name of the mountain range in the distance or the name of the tree in their front yard?

CT: So how exactly have you gotten involved?

TM: I got involved in environmental politics through the Progressive Student Alliance. I've always considered myself an environmentalist, but previously I wasn't really sure how to take action. Last December, Cal Poly hosted a town hall meeting discussing the new housing development called Student Housing North. It's a 2,700 bed housing complex going on the northwest side of Poly Canyon. It's the largest student housing development in the history of the csu. A sustainability effort began the previous summer to push for an environmentally responsible structure. When plans were presented that disregarded the sustainability efforts, it started a student movement. It galvanized the efforts of a lot of people who care about the environment around this issue. I was one of the main student organizers of this movement and we hosted town hall meetings to educate students on a weekly basis and get them involved. In February, we got in touch with Erik Roper, last year's csa (Cal State Student Association) Environmental Affairs Officer. He informed us about an incredibly successful movement in the uc system to fight for a sustainability policy at the regents level which is comparable to our chancellor's office level. So basically uc students had been working with Greenpeace for a year for clean energy requirements and sustainable building requirements within the system and they won. The uc system now has adopted one of the best sustainability policies in the nation. We've started the chapter of the California Student Sustainability Coalition on campus to push similar efforts in the csu.

CT: You've seen a lot of changes.

TM: Yes, and it's very encouraging to see just how quickly these changes have taken place. Now, we're continuing to fight for sustainability on campus and in the csu. One thing that I think is important to recognize about the sustainability movement is that there are no new concerns with this movement. It's not like we're discovering problems. The movement tries to find really creative ways to show people that every problem is somehow related to the environment. And people need to realize that it's really the small changes that make a difference like riding your bike or taking the bus to school instead of driving.

CT: So how can people get involved and take action?

TM: There are tons of ways for students to get involved in environmental efforts. I urge people to contact me and I can get them in touch with someone who knows what's going on for whatever issue they care about. Overall I think what people can do is just educate themselves and figure out how it affects them. Once they identify that, they're on the right track. I think a big misperception about movements such as this is that people think that they have to drop everything and get involved. This movement's not about that. It's not about changing what you're doing. It's about re-formulating how you do it

and educating yourself. A lot of students are already very involved in clubs and organizations, and they don't want to add anything else to their plate. To get involved with sustainability, they don't have to. If they can just educate themselves about it and find out what other students are doing, they can bring that discussion to the clubs or organizations that they're already in. One of the best things you can do is start dialogue.

CT: So it's important to raise awareness?

TM: Simply starting a discussion leads to change. Just start talking about it. There's a process that everyone has to go through for learning anything new and that process is always scary. And even if the situation seems way out of your control, it's still a problem. The question is, if you recognize a problem, when will you start looking for solutions? It's not about one person creating a perfect answer. It's about one person talking to another who talks to another and pretty soon, people will start voting with their actions and changes will happen. If the average person recognized all the ways in which the environment around them sustained their life, I think they'd be well on their way to recognizing why it's important for them to support the cause, and figuring out exactly what they can do in their day to day life to be a part of the solution. 

Interview conducted by Christi Thompson, an English major, president of Sigma Tau Delta, and a believer in sustainability.