Every year of my life has been one of the hottest years on record and there is nothing I can do about that. It doesn’t matter if I do everything I’m supposed to do: study hard, recycle, turn out the lights, take shorter showers or eat my locally grown organic vegetables. I have simply inherited a warmer world. I have seen the evidence. Right now my family has an exchange student from Kenya whose home is on the shores of Lake Victoria and says that the lake is drying up and that rain has not fallen for months there. What are we doing? I also witnessed Hurricane Irene and I will never, never forget walking with my family down to the nearby brook during the storm and hearing the boulders tumble like thunder rolling downstream, striking whatever was in their path. Irene did not affect my home but, for the next week I saw devastation like no other as I helped families in my town clean up their homes. Basements full of muck, a smell I will always remember. I saw people reluctant to pull soggy wet carpet out of their homes. They wanted to stay, they didn’t want to face reality. Climate change is ever bleak but I have hope and I always will. I am willing, more than willing, to help solve the problem of climate change. Well maybe “solve” is too drastic of a word, since at the rate things are progressing now we need to make some drastic lifestyle changes, so that the next generation even has a chance of happiness.

So, why am I so optimistic? The honest truth is that its young children who give me hope. Their spontaneous energy makes me appreciate life. Being alive in of itself is a gift, so why not celebrate that? Why not share in the joy of child, why not be curious? Why not run outside chasing a butterfly in bare feet? This summer I worked in the town of Sharon at the One Planet summer program. I spent hours with children outside. I tried to leave an impression on those children that being outside and appreciating the outdoors will lead to the best happiness ever. I am a senior in high school and in my future I want to study environmental science and elementary education, I want to continue helping children appreciate and save this wonderful world.

So how did I begin to care? After I saw the film An Inconvenient Truth and my mother was trained by Al Gore as a Climate Reality Project presenter, I became more aware of climate change and joined the fight, becoming a trained presenter a few years later. I was trained in Nashville, and I was amazed to be standing in a building that was flooded with a “500 year flood” just weeks before. Another blatant piece of evidence.

Many of my school projects have focused on climate change. A project I did 2 years ago focused on the oil industry in Ecuador and how it is harming the unique rain forest there, leaving a trail of sludge, disease, and rainforest destruction. When I was a junior, my exhibition project was titled Nature: The best fuel for a child’s soul. I discussed the fact that many children today are losing touch with nature, not realizing that nature is the most important motivator for them. I found out that children involved and connected with nature are stronger students, have more confidence, have a lower prevalence of ADHD and have higher levels of vitamin D, and better eyesight. But the main point is that children need to spend time outside from a young age and that it will help them teach others the beauty and wonder of our earth.

Last spring I had the wonderful opportunity to be an exchange student in Ecuador for 5 months. Several things amazed me about my experience. It was normal for people to throw trash out of the windows of their cars. I lived in the city of Riobamba in the mountains about 9,000 ft up and the trash littered all city streets. The first time one of my host family members threw trash out the window, I said what are you doing? Why? I then explained to them the importance of throwing trash in the trash can to protect animals and nature and all of god’s creation. I think I got through to their heads a little, because when we went on trips in the car, they would give me all the trash and I would throw it away when we got to our destination. Ecuador is a beautiful country that includes the Andes Mountains, Amazon Rainforest and Galapagos Islands. I had an Ecuadorian tour guide on my boat trip through the Galapagos Islands and I asked him how the islands are being affected by climate change and he said climate change is affecting everything. It is affecting animal population, ocean temperature and the length of the wet and dry seasons. My hope is to conserve places like Vermont and the Galapagos Islands, and I need everyone’s help to do so.

This year, I am involved with the Whole School Energy Challenge to reduce our schools’ energy use by 10%. And for my senior project I am researching climate change effects in Vermont. I am excited about these projects and more hopeful that it will teach me another way I can motivate my peers and community. Even at my progressive, environmentally conscious school, the majority of students are educated about climate change, but do not act. One of my goals is to make my peers care enough to act. I hope to make them realize that climate change is the most important challenge of our generation. We should all be writing letters, marching, planting trees, raising our voices. I am also saddened to learn that Vermont has fallen short of its carbon emission reduction goals for 2012. Even in this great state, where we are educated and conscious of climate change, our carbon emissions are the same as they were over twenty years ago. We need to seriously get to work. No excuses.

I want to leave you all with one last image: Night had fallen, and I was out on the deck of the boat with 16 others, floating through the paradise of the Galapagos Islands. The night was breezy and all of us sat talking about anything and everything. One of the last things we did was lie on our stomachs and watch the stars. I learned from our park guide about constellations in South America and saw the Southern Cross for the first time. I lay their entranced at the sky thinking that humans have made such an impact and yet we are so small, just one little dot of millions. I realized that that exact thought is our destruction and our salvation because if we can be so little and make so much change for the worse, we can all do the same for the better. That is my challenge to all of you.