

# Legacy in the Making

#NEVERAGAIN

In March 2018, eleven-year-old classmates and neighbors **Naomi Wadler** and **Carter Anderson** organized a walkout at their Virginia elementary school in honor of the 17 victims of the infamous high school shooting in Parkland, Florida. Inspired by the #NeverAgain movement walkouts happening at high schools and colleges across the country, Wadler, Anderson, and their classmates stood in silence for 18 minutes, adding an extra minute to honor Courtlin Arrington, a 17-year-old black girl who was shot at her Alabama high school just three weeks after the tragedy in Parkland. Once their unique story spread, Wadler was invited to speak at the March For Our Lives rally in Washington, D.C., where she urged thousands to remember the black women, like Arrington, who are disproportionately the victims of gun violence. Wadler and Anderson epitomize legacy makers working to shift culture within their community and beyond through their participation in the #NeverAgain movement. In 2018, they were recognized as honorees of the inaugural New Legacy Makers' Showcase, a collaboration between The Legacy Lab and the Disruptor Foundation, for their commitment to driving lasting change by inspiring important conversations on gun violence and racism.



**NAOMI WADLER:** Carter said yes and a few hours later we were in the principal's office discussing it. At first, the principal gave us a no. He told us that it was too mature of a topic for us and that it wasn't appropriate. He suggested that maybe we could do it during recess. When he said that we would need parental supervision, I told him that we wouldn't need parental supervision to be shot in our own classrooms. Eventually we won him over. We weren't asking for his permission that day. We were asking for his support.

Our teachers were encouraging, but our peers and colleagues—the kids and parents who stood with us—were truly our biggest supporters. Together we began meeting and started a petition. These kids and their parents let us know that we could do it and they were going to help. They gave us ideas. They had our backs. They're the ones who stood with us at that walkout on the schoolyard.

**Can you share about how you first got involved with the #NeverAgain movement and who supported you along the way?**

**CARTER ANDERSON:** A little less than a week after the Parkland

shooting, my friend Matt and I went to the White House to petition for gun legislation reform. There were a lot of kids there making a difference. The next day at school, Naomi asked me if I wanted to organize a walkout together.

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Originally, the walkout was going to last 17 minutes in honor of the 17 victims of the Parkland shooting. For our walkout, we decided to add an extra minute in honor of Courtlin Arrington, a 17-year-old black girl who had lost her life to gun violence at her school just a week before our protest.

Looking back on everything, the Parkland shooting was really the root of us getting involved in this entire movement. It was the reason I spoke at March For Our Lives and it was the reason we were able to stand up to doubt. In many ways, the Parkland shooting was just the beginning of our inspiration on a much bigger topic.

### **Can you talk a little more about your decision to honor Courtlin Arrington in your walkout?**

**CA:** I knew it would be meaningful to honor Courtlin because she was

both a person who died from gun violence and a person who could have helped those hurt by gun violence. She was a nurse—well, she was training to be a nurse—and she could have helped people who might have been shot. Instead, she was shot in her own school.

**NW:** The reason that I wanted to include Courtlin Arrington was a reason that my family and I have known for as long as I can remember. When black women are shot and killed, their names aren't remembered. Their pictures aren't shown on the news. Their stories don't go viral on Twitter.

Being able to include Courtlin by having multiple signs in her honor and standing out there for 18 minutes rather than 17 made a statement. It forced the media to acknowledge Courtlin—and black women like her—as real people rather than statistics. We felt that it added something to the conversation about schools and gun violence that wasn't being discussed.

### **What was it like to see the news coverage of the walkout start to spread? How did you get involved with March For Our Lives from there?**

**NW:** It was motivating to know that we could get out to people and spread a message. It confirmed to me that even though we were young, the setbacks weren't going to matter and we didn't have to listen

to our haters. It was motivating to know that even before the walkout, by the time we were done speaking at a local high school town hall, *The Guardian* and *The Washington Post* wanted to interview us.

Carter and I did an interview with *The Guardian* the morning of the walkout and shared with the reporter why we added the extra minute. About a week after the walkout, that video of Carter and I went viral. People saw it. The Parkland kids saw it. The March For Our Lives organizers saw it. Those organizers ended up calling my mother one day, asking if I would be interested in participating. When we got home, she asked me and I said yes. Later that day, George Clooney called. My mom thought I wouldn't know who he was. We had a conversation and then I had two days to write a speech.

Although I was very nervous before I went on stage, I poured my heart and soul into that speech. I thought of everything I wanted to say—everything I had the opportunity to say on behalf of those who couldn't be there. I hope all the black girls and women who saw that speech realize there's a growing value for them. It was amazing to meet so many people at March For Our Lives—activists, celebrities, and students alike—who share our passion and our vision for change.

**CA:** Naomi did a great job up there. And all the news coverage made us realize that we could make a difference. People from all over the world, including my family in Seattle and

London, were congratulating us kids and telling us to keep doing something. When there were people who didn't like what we were doing, we talked to each other and our parents and friends and just kept going.

**Speaking of learning from people who share your vision, what role models, current or historic, inspire your activism against gun violence and racial injustice?**

**NW:** For racial injustice, my role model and the woman who inspired me to speak up for black girls' worth is Claudette Colvin. She refused to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, just nine months before Rosa Parks did the same thing, so some people like to call her "the original Rosa Parks." But I like to think of her as her own entity—her own soul. She had her own ideas and her own courage to be able to stand up to white police officers when she knew that it would get her in huge trouble at the time.

Emma Gonzales is a role model who inspires me to advocate for gun safety. She was part of the inspiration for my March For Our Lives speech. She's a high school senior who survived the Parkland shooting and is now an activist for gun control. Watching her speech at the Rally to Support Firearm Safety Legislation in February on TV was a really empowering moment for me. So, getting the opportunity to meet her at March For Our Lives was enlightening.

**CA:** One of the role models I look up to is Roberto Clemente. He was a Major League Baseball player from Puerto Rico. When a massive earthquake hit Managua in Nicaragua, a place near his home country that he had recently visited, he sent aid packages. But the packages never made it to Managua. So, Roberto ended up going on the plane, because he wanted to serve alongside the aid workers and make sure the supplies got to the right people. I look up to him because he didn't just send help, he went himself.

**You recently received the Tribeca Disruptive Innovation Awards for your bold activism. What does this recognition mean for you and the movement you're leading?**

**NW:** The recognition and encouraging messages we both receive are not just rewarding—they're motivating. By rewarding, I mean that I am proud that we've been able to get to this point without stuttering with our beliefs. By motivating, I mean that all of this coverage drives us to keep going. It's confirmation that people are listening—that we can do more and our activism isn't going to stop here.

**CA:** I was really grateful for the honor, but more important, it showed that other people had heard our message. It wasn't just the walkout that people heard about, it was also adding the extra minute. It was the newspaper interviews that happened. It was the March For Our Lives speech. I was really grateful to

be at the Tribeca Disruptive Innovation Awards because it brought recognition not just to our school walkout, but to the ongoing movement we're helping to build.

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**What are some of the misconceptions that people have about you and your advocacy, and how do you overcome them?**

**NW:** I think some people feel attacked because they feel we're trying to take away their guns. The truth is, we're not trying to take away anyone's guns, we're advocating for legal steps to regulate them. We don't want every person carrying a rifle around. I hope that adults realize that innocent people are losing their lives and we all need to keep working hard to make gun reform and school safety a top priority.

I also have a lot of people ask me how it feels to be a future leader. I don't like the term "future leader," I like to think that both Carter and

I are current leaders and that we don't need an age certificate to be identified as such.

Along those lines, every now and then, someone will say that we're just kids and we don't understand what we're talking about. When this happens, I don't do anything about it. I just let it fly over my head, because I know that if I go onto a stage telling people that they're wrong and they shouldn't believe what they believe, I will only be proving their point by responding immaturely. I'll look like I don't know what I'm talking about and am too hardheaded to understand. So, I don't do anything.

**CA:** I agree with Naomi. Along the way, a few adults have doubted us because of our age. When we first organized the walkout, I remember some parents felt that we weren't old enough to know about the topic. It was as if, because we were fifth graders, we were completely unaware of what was happening in the world. Back then—and to this day—I also ignore these comments. I just don't listen to them. If people want to say that, so be it. They can say what they believe and I can't change them by saying something else. All I can do is focus on doing what I believe is right.

**What's next for you two, both in the immediate future and in regard to the long-term legacy you want to create?**

**NW:** I don't think that I'm ever going to stop being a so-called "activist"

and doing the work. I don't think I'm ever going to stop rising up and inspiring others, young and old. I do know that there's never going to be a complete end to racism and there's never going to be a world free of gun violence. But the more that we are able to lower those casualties and lower the amount of people who feel so negatively towards other humans, the better our world becomes. I think that's the legacy that I hope to have—a legacy that's both inspiring and empowering.

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In the immediate future, I would like to gain a larger platform to continue to do what I'm doing. Did I mention that Carter and I are also writing a book? It's a graphic novel. We hope it inspires kids like us to know their worth and believe that they can make a difference. We want to get it out to kids who don't enjoy reading as much as we do, but who like reading superhero comics. We hope they can read this graphic novel and get the message.

**CA:** I'm excited for this book because it will not only allow this movement to stretch out farther, but it will hopefully inspire more participation in activism from youth. I've wanted to write a book for a while, but never felt like I could. Now I have an incredible opportunity. We hope this book will show kids that they can do all the things they dream of doing to make this world a better place, whether that might be writing a history book, becoming a teacher, or speaking up as an activist.

**What unique perspective do you think kids bring to the conversation about gun violence and racial injustice that adults might be missing?**

**NW:** Kids can bring to the table a unique perspective that adults might not have because we have a way of looking at things without being intoxicated with all the ideas of "the real world" that adults have. We are able to bring a sense of innocence and a humane point of view to the table.

**CA:** As the rising generation of leaders, I think we can bring a vision of what the future might look like. And it won't be that guns were never regulated. When kids speak up on important topics that affect us all, they bring a fresh perspective to ideas that might be stuck in the past. I noticed that it was easier for us kids to agree on common-sense gun safety than the adults. Maybe

because we aren't focused on the money or the politics.

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### **What do you want the world to look like when you grow up?**

**CA:** I hope that when I'm an adult, people won't be boasting about guns or joking about guns or using guns to hurt people or themselves in schools or on the streets. We want to change the culture and the conversation around guns, so that it isn't something kids or adults have to worry about in the future. We also want kids to know that their voices matter and they should be heard and seen.

**NW:** I hope that as youth and as a country in general, we're having more common-sense conversations on a variety of topics and that we're not as divided as we are

now. I hope that when I grow up, people pay less attention to whether you're a Democrat or a Republican. I hope they pay attention to the fact that you're a human being entitled to your own opinion and capable of having a reasonable conversation. The long-term impact I want to have is encouraging people of different ages, races, and political backgrounds to feel freer to have genuine, honest dialogues.

### **What advice do you have for other kids hoping to launch their own legacy in the making?**

**CA:** I would say to be yourself. It's OK to think differently. If someone says, "Hey, you should do this thing," you don't have to do it unless it's what you feel is right for you.

**NW:** Along similar lines, I would say success looks like you. I used to try to define myself by other people's standards. I used to think that I had to be my role models. Now I like to say "Success looks like you," to prove that you shouldn't let your teachers or your parents or your friends define success for you. If you think that reading ten books is success, that's success. If you think that giving a speech and giving out fliers is success, then that's success. So, I'd encourage other kids who are looking to make a lasting difference to define that difference by their own standards.

*While some have viewed their youth as a weakness, Naomi Wadler and Carter Anderson have proven the power of personal ambition at any age. At just 11 years old when they organized the walkout, they are representatives of a rising generation of activists who are creating a safer and more equitable world. Through the #NeverAgain walkout that Wadler and Anderson organized at their elementary school and subsequent speaking opportunities that have followed, these young activists are bringing an important perspective to conversations about gun violence and racial injustice. With their upcoming graphic novel and continued activism, Wadler and Anderson are inspiring kids like themselves to be not only the legacy makers of tomorrow, but also the legacy makers of today.*

**THIS ARTICLE IS PART OF A SPECIAL SERIES OF INTERVIEWS WITH THE HONOREES OF THE INAUGURAL NEW LEGACY MAKERS' SHOWCASE, A PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN THE LEGACY LAB AND THE DISRUPTOR FOUNDATION TO HONOR THE NEXT GENERATION OF YOUNG LEADERS CHANGING THE WORLD FOR THE BETTER.**

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