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SARAH Today on *Chalk Radio*, we're exploring climate action and how one nonprofit is providing a framework for young
HANSEN: people to help effect change.

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LESHCHINSKIY: they're mature enough to understand fairly complex concepts. Ultimately, we hope that Ambassadors will teach students, students will teach families, and families will demand action.

SARAH I'm your host, Sarah Hansen. With us today is Brandon Leshchinskiy, a graduate student in a technology and
HANSEN: policy master's program and the aeronautics and astronautics master's program at MIT. Brandon's also working with a nonprofit called EarthDNA. If this organization sounds familiar to you, it's because our last guest, professor of astronautics Dava Newman, co-founded EarthDNA. It's a global platform for climate advocacy and action. Our guest today, Brandon, helped create a program called EarthDNA Ambassadors, which provides young people with climate leadership training. In addition to learning about the science behind climate change, Ambassadors also develop skills focused on communication, negotiation, and storytelling.

BRANDON We envision a community of climate leaders who engage their own communities on their campuses at their
LESHCHINSKIY: schools on climate change. Current Ambassadors come from different backgrounds, whether PhD students in immunology or undergraduate students in business. Some of them have teaching experience, but not all of them.

SARAH One of the tools that EarthDNA equips their Ambassadors with is called Climate 101. Available on MIT
HANSEN: OpenCourseWare and EarthDNA.org, it's an interactive workshop that was designed to engage communities around climate change and motivate people to act. But changing human behavior can be difficult, so Climate 101 starts with something a bit more approachable-- the power of conversation.

BRANDON Well, I think talking about it is really important because I think that climate change has the stigma about it
LESHCHINSKIY: where, if you even bring it up, you're viewed as a hippie environmentalist and alarmist and all of these things. And so even by having conversations about it and making it normal to have conversations about climate change, you empower others to do that, as well. And that's huge because, for a lot of people, they just don't hear about climate change that often, or if they hear about it, it's not necessarily the best information. And so if we can have people talking about climate change in a way that's personal and meaningful to their family members, who might be climate skeptics, that's one of the best ways to create the attitude and behavioral change that's necessary to actually overcome the problem of climate change.

SARAH In addition to normalizing discussions on climate change, the Climate 101 presentation is designed to improve
HANSEN: climate literacy. That means empowering people to think critically about climate change data and research, and even targeted marketing campaigns.

BRANDON One of the things that we actually talk about in the Climate 101 workshop is the effect of different information **LESHCHINSKIY:** campaigns by fossil fuel companies, who have a very clear interest in preventing any kind of climate action and in promoting misinformation among the public, promoting doubt among the public about whether climate change happens. It's really important for me that people are able to sift through all that competing information in order to decide for themselves whether climate change is real, whether it matters to them, and whether they should do something about it. Now, I think the answer to all three of those questions is yes, but I want to help people process this deluge of information by themselves and be aware that there are people that are intentionally trying to misinform them.

SARAH Climate literacy is critical to efforts for creating a grassroots movement of climate change action. Brandon sees **HANSEN:** the EarthDNA Ambassadors, who are between the ages of 16 and 30, as the next generation of climate leaders and educators.

BRANDON The thing about teaching young people, in particular, is that young people are open-minded to new material, but **LESHCHINSKIY:** they're mature enough to understand fairly complex concepts. They're also part of their parents' trusted networks. So if we can talk to young people, they can talk to their parents. Ultimately, we hope that Ambassadors will teach students, students will teach families, and families will demand action.

Ultimately, I think in creating EarthDNA Ambassadors, I was really interested in helping people who are passionate about climate change find their own voice, and helping them to express their own beliefs and their own opinions and make a change in their own community. I think empowering people who care about climate change to find their voice and use it has been one of the most rewarding things that I've done, and I'm just really grateful for the opportunity to be part of this community of people that are all interested in self-development, in leadership, and in climate change.

SARAH In putting the Climate 101 presentation together, Brandon and the EarthDNA team didn't want to entirely **HANSEN:** reinvent the wheel. They were open to utilizing many different materials, from a variety of reputable sources, to create a comprehensive experience for participants. And part of what makes it so effective is that the presentation has been developed to appeal to a wide audience, whether you're a high school student or a late career professional.

BRANDON So most climate change educational materials focus almost exclusively on the science, while Climate 101 covers **LESHCHINSKIY:** in 45 minutes the science, the economics, and the civics of climate change. And what that allows us to do is to engage with people who wouldn't typically consider climate change to be one of their first priorities. The idea was to create a single composition that keeps people's attention, that keeps people engaged, that keeps people interested and excited, while also sharing a large amount of information about climate change from different perspectives. And I think that's what Climate 101 has accomplished.

SARAH And EarthDNA has data to back that up. Surveys they've collected show that, before the presentation, about half **HANSEN:** of the students talked to their friends or family about climate change twice a week. But afterward, the number of people participating in those conversations jumped to over 80%. Sometimes, those conversations can be difficult, especially when they're with people who are skeptical about climate change. But Climate 101 helps Ambassadors with that, too.

BRANDON When it comes to climate change, even the stories of what's happening is very different, right? We have different **LESHCHINSKIY:** interpretations of different facts that lead us to different conclusions, and then we often argue about those conclusions without understanding each other's interpretations or the observations that each of us have made. And so even in bringing up a climate change conversation, you have to be aware that you might be threatening the way that somebody sees themselves. Or maybe in engaging in these conversations, you are threatening somebody's sense of patriotism or sense of being a good person.

Especially in areas where the economy is based in fossil fuels, it can be really difficult because, ultimately, a climate change conversation can amount to an accusation that that person is not just providing food for their family, but also is damaging the Earth and harming a lot of people. And so it's really important to consider all of those things as you have these climate change conversations. So instead of trying to convince the other person or persuade the other person, listen, help them empty their heart and express why they're frustrated with the situation. And then they'll be more likely to listen to your own experiences and more receptive to why you think climate change matters and is relevant.

SARAH Something else that helps the Climate 101 presentation resonate across different audiences is the incorporation **HANSEN:** of local insights. This targeted approach helps distill the larger, sometimes overwhelming issue of climate change into something more digestible.

BRANDON One of the problems with climate change discussions is that it's a huge problem, right, it affects the entire world, **LESHCHINSKIY:** and that happens over the course of decades. But people live their lives at home or in their town, and people live their lives day to day. So when you start talking about these massive, overwhelming changes, it can be really easy to just dismiss them as either things that don't affect me or things that I can't do anything about.

The idea of creating localized insights and personally meaningful insights is that we need to talk about climate change in a way that's relevant to the intended audience. And so if we can say, for example, well, here in Boston, the city was actually considering building seawalls because of anticipated flooding, now, all of a sudden, that's something that's happening in my neighborhood. That's something that's like, oh my god, that's coming for me. That's not the Earth is warming by 2 degrees Celsius, which doesn't really mean much to me, it's, oh my god, there's going to be flooding in Boston?

SARAH The more I talked with Brandon, the more I wanted to know what was personally motivating him to engage in **HANSEN:** climate action work. He began to talk about the intergenerational experiences of his own family.

BRANDON A few years ago, my family celebrated its 25th anniversary in the United States. We were all at my grandparents' **LESHCHINSKIY:** place, seated around this beautiful dining room table in front of a gorgeous display case full of fancy china, and my grandma was bustling around, making sure we all had enough of that fatty and meaty Ukrainian food that my family loves. And my family was telling stories, stories of my childhood that I'd been hearing for years, but stories that helped us reflect on what it meant to come to the United States.

My grandpa told how he'd only taken one flight in his whole life, and it was to come to the United States, because the only thing that he feared more than flying was staying in a collapsed Soviet state. My grandma, how she came to the US without knowing any English, and not only learned English, but also learned how to code, and recently retired as a senior software developer. My mom, how she, after four months here, was caught stealing a \$7 bottle of face cream because she wanted to get a gift for her mom's birthday and she couldn't afford it. And my mom went on and started a business that ended up putting me through college, but even 25 years later, she was still so embarrassed and ashamed of that moment.

I turned to my dad, and I asked him whether he ever missed the Ukraine. It's where he grew up. It's where his friends are. And he turned to me and responded in Russian that only in his worst nightmare would he ever wake up back in that hell. And to me, that moment really crystallizes this idea that so much of who we are and what we have is determined by choices that people make before we're even born. And that's just such a great injustice. And climate change exemplifies that. I think climate change is one of the great injustices of our time.

It was created primarily by wealthy, privileged people in developed nations, and it will primarily affect the vulnerable, the poor, the sick, in many cases people who never even contributed to the problem. I think that, for those of us who have an opportunity to fight that injustice, for those of us who have benefited from being fortunate and from being born in the right place at the right time, we have a real obligation to help the people who don't necessarily have those opportunities now reach those same opportunities. And in this case, it means doing something about this massive global problem that will eventually affect all of us, but is already affecting many of the most vulnerable.

**SARAH
HANSEN:**

One important component in tackling climate change is recognizing that it's a collective issue that affects just about everyone. Brandon incorporated interactive activities into the Climate 101 curriculum to help simulate how these collective dilemmas can play out. These activities are modeled on the concept of the tragedy of the commons, where people tend to act selfishly when they believe that their individual actions won't make an impact. A classic example of the tragedy of the commons is the gradual overfishing of a public waterway. And in some ways, this concept mirrors what we've seen throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. While these issues are quite different, of course, they do both require collaborative efforts to make a real difference in tackling them, and our everyday choices actually can have an immediate impact.

**BRANDON
LESHCHINSKIY:**

I think COVID is a really great example of collective dilemmas. And in the US, in particular, we have this very individualist attitude, personal liberty above all else. And personal liberty is obviously super important, but we see in a case like COVID that, when crises arise, sometimes we do need to act for the collective good. And that can be really difficult, but climate change is similar. The longer we waited to take action on COVID, the more drastic the action had to be. And with climate change, it's similar.

Had we started really focusing on reducing our emissions and transitioning to renewable energy, as well as making some of the other changes we need to make, in 2000, we could have done it pretty gradually, and at a reasonable pace. But we waited 20 years, and it looks like we're still waiting. So now, the action that we have to take is much more drastic than had we done it 20 years ago. And if we continue to wait, that action will have to be still more drastic. So yesterday is better than today, and today is better than tomorrow, to quote one of the articles that I read regarding COVID, but that also applies equally well to climate change.

SARAH HANSEN: Many people worry that attention on climate change has weakened due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but Brandon sees a space for optimism, and views these overlapping crises as an opportunity.

BRANDON LESHCHINSKIY: I think, for a lot of climate activists, right now is difficult in terms of climate activism because COVID is a really serious and really urgent problem, and it can be hard to spare any attention or any emotion for climate change, this other scary thing. But times of crisis are actually times of opportunity. And so right now is a time that people feel like they need connection and purpose and community. And so right now is an opportunity for us to continue growing and giving people those things, and it's also an opportunity to fight even harder for some of the changes that we need to make in order to overcome the climate change issue, as well as the COVID issue.

SARAH HANSEN: Much of Brandon's work around this project, which inspires others to take a leadership role in their own way, has been driven by his own experiences with leaders in his life. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, he's found strong leaders in his advisor, Professor Dava Newman at MIT, who you heard from in our last episode, and Rand Wentworth, Brandon's environmental leadership professor at the Harvard Kennedy School.

BRANDON LESHCHINSKIY: They have both been such incredible models of what it means to be a leader during a crisis. They have been hyperattentive to their students' needs, so empathetic, such good listeners, adaptive and flexible and positive. And that has been really inspiring for me. Empathy is everything, and it's just so hard right now. You know, my emotional reserves that I usually use to accomplish tasks that I don't necessarily find as interesting are gone.

At this point, I'm just hyperfocused on staying sane, staying happy, staying healthy. And Rand and Dava both really understand that. And they start every meeting with a check-in. How are you guys? What can I do to help? And that's something that I hope to take forward as an immediate response in a crisis, is to figure out, OK, how are the people that are affected by this crisis doing, and what can I do to accommodate them and to make it easier for them.

SARAH HANSEN: Brandon understands that many people, when faced with the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the threat of climate change, are experiencing a kind of doom fatigue. If you seek it out, there can be an overwhelming amount of bad news about both crises. But Brandon is working on reframing this thinking into something more approachable so that people can carry forward with important work in their own manageable way, without feeling like it's all just too much to handle.

BRANDON LESHCHINSKIY: There are definitely times when I also feel like, why am I even bothering? There's so much out there to improve. What can I do? There's a story that I love. It's told by Wangari Maathai, who's a Nobel Peace Prize winner for her environmental work. She tells a story of a great big forest fire, and how all of the animals are running out of the forest, and they're standing next to it as it burns. But one animal, the hummingbird, starts going to a nearby lake and carrying one drop of water at a time to douse the forest fire.

And all the other animals are asking, what are you doing? You're so small. This fire is so big. You can't possibly do anything about it. The elephant is standing there with its big trunk, all the other animals that are also much bigger, just doing nothing. The hummingbird keeps on going. And then finally, without missing a beat, the hummingbird says, I'm doing the best I can. And Wangari Maathai says, we should all be like hummingbirds. We should all just do the best that we can. And some days, that's not very much at all. And that's OK. But we should all remember that we each can do something, and that that matters, and that that's enough in that moment.

**SARAH
HANSEN:**

In our individual work on climate change, it's OK to take the approach of the hummingbird to make a difference. If you're interested in becoming an EarthDNA Ambassador or want to learn more about their training program and materials, head to [EarthDNA.org/ambassadors](https://earthdna.org/ambassadors). You can also find the Climate 101 presentation slides, a video of Brandon giving the presentation, Ambassador program application, handouts and volunteer resources on our MIT OpenCourseWare website.

And by the way, did you know OpenCourseWare is turning 20? It's taken a community to bring OCW to this moment, and we want you to be a part of it and what comes next. Please join us for a virtual celebration of OCW's impact, community, and the future of open sharing on Wednesday, April 7th, 2021 at 12:00 PM Eastern time. You can register using the link at our show notes, or just tune in live to OCW's YouTube, Instagram, or Facebook pages. Thank you for making these first two decades possible, and thanks so much for listening to the *Chalk Radio* podcast. Until I see you on April 7th, signing off from Cambridge, Massachusetts, I'm Sarah Hansen from MIT OpenCourseWare.

**AUDIO
BUMPER:**

Ma, park the car.