



Leah Greenberg '08 and Ezra Levin '07

# One Nation, Indivisible

What started as a **pledge** among a few Carleton friends to turn their frustration into **action** quickly became a blueprint for a new generation of local activists committed to doing more than complain about politics on social media.

BY THOMAS ROZWADOWSKI



## **Political revolutions** have to start somewhere.

When Ezra Levin '07 and Leah Greenberg '08 met up with Sara Clough '07 in an Austin, Texas, watering hole last Thanksgiving, the trio didn't have a plan. They only knew that, following the outcome of the presidential election, they wanted to do something that felt more productive than venting on their Facebook pages.

Clough in particular was looking for positive ways to channel her anger. She contacted Levin, a Carleton classmate and former congressional staffer who grew up in nearby Buda, Texas. The pair agreed to meet when Levin and Greenberg (who are married to each other and live in Washington, D.C.) visited Texas for the holiday. Conversation led to questions. Questions led to strategy. Strategy led to Levin and Greenberg thinking about their experiences on Capitol Hill: Levin worked with Lloyd Doggett, a U.S. representative from Texas, as a policy director, and Greenberg worked with Tom Perriello, a former Virginia representative, in the same capacity.

"Ezra can be a bit self-deprecating, and I remember him saying early on, 'Well, Leah and I know how to write a good position paper'—and then he questioned what kind of skill that even was," Clough says. "But to me, it was like, 'Hey, that's real knowledge!' They had valuable experiences to share. As we kept talking, Ezra and Leah started reminiscing about working on the Hill and watching the Tea Party's impact."

Harnessing the grassroots strategies of Tea Party activists—who opposed government spending during Barack Obama's presidency—lit the spark for what would become the "Google doc read 'round the world," a 23-page action plan titled *Indivisible: A practical guide for resisting the Trump agenda*. When the missive—which Levin and Greenberg drafted with input from other congressional staffers and friends—hit social media on December 14, 2016, there were so many people trying to print or download the document in the first few hours that it crashed.

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“It was a tool kit, plain and simple,” says Levin. “We wanted to demystify Congress for people. But even as it was spreading fast, at no point did we think, ‘Hey, maybe we can do this full time.’ In fact, in the guide, we specifically state that we have our own jobs and we’re not looking to start an organization.

“Our measure for success was, maybe a few months down the line, getting an e-mail from someone saying, ‘I went to a town hall meeting and used your guide to ask questions. Thanks, it was really helpful.’”

The *Indivisible* document is essentially the Tea Party playbook laid out like a volume of *Political Organizing for Dummies*. In fact, its thesis is almost too simple to be taken seriously—or as Levin and Greenberg, both Carleton political science majors, wrote of Tea Party activists in a January *New York Times* op-ed: “Their tactics weren’t fancy. They just showed up on their home turf and said no.”

Neither a liberal values manifesto nor a personal screed against President Trump, the *Indivisible* guide instead preaches a hyperlocal focus on community organizing, covering questions on everything from whether to take a sign to a town hall meeting and where to sit, to laying out a sample script for how to speak with your member of Congress on the phone.

And that’s the key: *your* member of Congress. The endeavor’s original goal was to help people find a plausible path toward mobilizing in their own backyard. Levin and Greenberg thought that by providing simple, realistic background on how Congress operates, they might even motivate some people to run for local office.

“After the election, people wanted to know how their actions fit into a larger strategy,” says Greenberg, who grew up in Chevy Chase, Maryland, just outside D.C. “Suddenly a lot of people wanted to make a commitment bigger than sending an e-mail or signing a petition.”

“We chose the name *Indivisible* because we thought that progressives should come together beyond their singular issues,” adds Levin. “If you’re for reproductive rights advocacy, great. But now you have to stand up for the Dreamers. If you’re an advocate for the Dreamers, okay, now stand up for a progressive tax code. And so on. That’s the only way to succeed in Washington. If you do nothing until your issue is threatened, you lose.”

As the *Indivisible* guide continued to spread on the Internet, Levin and Greenberg’s definition of success also changed. Both of them were about to start new jobs: Levin as a poverty policy researcher at Georgetown University, Greenberg as a policy director for a gubernatorial campaign. But as hundreds of local groups began to sprout up nationwide, they couldn’t ignore the momentum.

“We kept getting questions: ‘I have 20 people in my living room. I have 500 people signed up to meet. What do I do?’”

Levin says. “It built up so quickly that Leah and I had to make a choice. And we couldn’t justify abandoning this call to action—this responsibility—that we helped create.”

Levin and Greenberg now helm the Indivisible Project, a D.C.-based nonprofit that disseminates resources on various political fronts (immigration, health care, taxes) while advising local Indivisible satellites as in-person mentors and through weekly e-mail updates. For example, in the wake of the Las Vegas shooting in early October, Indivisible prepared a script for how to talk to your legislators about gun policies—along with what legislation was being considered in the House of Representatives. Levin and Greenberg’s full-throated commitment to Indivisible has placed them in an unexpected position. Thanks to national media write-ups and appearances on *The Rachel Maddow Show* and other national television programs, they are the public faces of grassroots resistance in the Trump era. The power couple even landed at number two on Politico’s 2017 list of “50 Ideas Blowing Up American Politics”—behind recently ousted Trump strategist Steve Bannon.

Almost a year after that first meeting in Austin, roughly 5,800 groups are registered with Indivisible—at least two in every congressional district in the nation. The Google document has been viewed or downloaded more than 2 million times. And Indivisible’s homepage—indivisible.org—has been viewed more than 18 million times.

“Some of our strongest groups consist of people who do not affiliate with a party. They are people who are disturbed by the direction of the country and want to get involved,” says Greenberg.

“We want local Indivisible communities to engage more broadly than just focusing on congressional action. There’s something about the social ties of getting people together,” she says. “We want them to share ideas and talk in person about how policies have an impact on their lives. Sure, you can use the Internet to spread information, but our goal is to get people in the same room as quickly as possible. That momentum is what creates change.”

And that’s where Clough comes back in. She now serves on the board of Indivisible Austin, focusing on recruiting new members, attending meetings, and building coalitions with other grassroots groups in the city—a “far cry from where I could have pictured myself a year ago,” she says.

“Look, we wrote the original Google document, but it’s the people who read it and said, ‘Okay, we’re going to do something about this’ that I’m in awe of,” Levin says. “They’re the ones who own Indivisible. They’re the ones who are committed to creating change. To me, *that’s* the special thing that has happened.”

# Profiles in Activism

Carleton's history of inspiring young people to care about the world around them is well documented. Carls help the homeless and build health clinics. They start nonprofits and lead political movements. They create art and question authority. While the following Carls share a roll-up-your-sleeves desire to dig in and construct change around a personal issue or belief system, their paths to discovery are as varied as their causes. Here's how they've tried to make a difference—and influence others to do the same.

As told to Thomas Rozwadowski | Illustrations by Sergio Ingravalle



*“Our idea is really the American idea. If you work hard and sacrifice, you can be anything you want to be.”*

## Higher Education

**JIM McCORKELL '90** is CEO and founder of College Possible, a St. Paul–based national nonprofit that offers college coaching and support to low-income high school students. A graduate of Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, McCorkell started his organization out of a spare bedroom in 2000. In its first year, College Possible served 35 students from two schools. The organization has since expanded to six cities and has helped more than 30,000 students.

I grew up in Northfield. My mom worked in the Carleton library for more than 30 years. My dad worked in a shop as a painter. In high school, I was fortunate to take classes at Carleton. During my senior year, I took a class with Paul Wellstone and he opened my eyes to the injustices of the world, things you maybe don't see as clearly in a small town. Paul used to say to us, “Find the corner of the world you care about and be part of the solution.”

When the kernel of College Possible popped into my head, I felt an enormous amount of peace: “Yes, *that's* what I should do with my life.” College Possible was born out of my life's experience. My parents never made it to college, but they raised five kids who did. I saw how difficult their lives had been and what a difference college educations made in my own family.

Many low-income students think, “Well, people like me don't go to college.” Sometimes high school counselors even tell them “You are not college material.” Yet today almost all of the job and wage growth goes to people with some form of postsecondary education. So how are you going to get ahead if you don't go to college?

We believe all students in America deserve a fair shot to go as far as their talent and effort will take them. Maybe not everyone is destined for a four-year college, but that should not be preordained because you're from a disadvantaged background or you're a person of color. Everybody deserves a fair shot.



*“The more something is kept quiet and in the shadows, the more likely shame will grow.”*

## Women's Health and Education

**ARIANA ABADIAN-HEIFETZ '12** created *Spreading Your Wings*, a Hindi and English comic book that teaches girls in rural India about menstrual hygiene. While Abadian-Heifetz was working for a nongovernmental organization in Uttar Pradesh, she taught girls ages 7 to 18 about puberty and body positivity. This winter, she is returning to India to develop a K–12 curriculum on civic responsibility and mindfulness for the Heritage School in Gurgaon.

My dad is a white Jewish guy. My mother is Iranian-born and Zoroastrian. I grew up in a household where I had the freedom to visit various communities and integrate what I liked from each one. Questioning is at the heart of activism. My goal is to listen.

ARIANA ABADIAN-HEIFETZ  
WOMEN'S HEALTH AND EDUCATION

JIM McCORKELL  
HIGHER EDUCATION

PROFILES IN ACTIVISM

I want to understand how people see themselves and their problems.

I did not arrive in India planning to write a comic book. I was hired by an NGO to develop a political empowerment program for village women who were running for local office, but once I got there, it became evident that I could help in other ways. Months later, after I had built trust in the community, I was asked to conduct needs assessments with groups of young village girls. Menstruation came up a lot. The girls wanted to learn about puberty. They wanted to know how to care for their bodies.

There are a lot of myths about periods throughout the world—anything from “it’s bad to ride a bike during your period” to “if you go into the kitchen on your period, it’ll make people sick.” But to talk about menstruation is taboo and shameful in many places, too. So these stigmas persist, and the consequence is often poor hygiene and poor self-esteem: girls view their bodies as inherently impure and unworthy of care.

I worked on this comic for the past year and a half not knowing if anyone would even care about it. But it felt important to create a colorful, engaging entry point for these girls. I found an illustrator and a publisher. I did a crowdfunding campaign. I built a website. My overarching goals are to help girls reframe the way they see their bodies and to inspire them to question gender roles—to keep what’s beautiful in their culture and change what’s discriminatory. For me, this work is about empowering women to claim their dignity, freedom, and self-worth.



*“The heartbreak and pain in the world are overwhelming to me, but I refuse to shy away from those realities.”*

## Human Rights and Religion

**The Reverend ELIZABETH NGUYEN '09 is a ministry and leadership mentor for youth and young adults of color with the Unitarian Universalist Association in Boston. She also serves as spiritual adviser to Standing on the Side of Love, a Unitarian Universalist group that affirms church tenets of unconditional and universal love as the foundation for stopping oppression and flanking front-line organizers. Nguyen is a graduate of Harvard Divinity School.**

Growing up as Vietnamese American, mostly in Tennessee and Ohio, I had my own experiences of difference. At school, kids would make fun of me because my lunch smelled like fish sauce or they didn’t know how to pronounce my name. I was asked constantly, “Where are you from?” Even as a kid, I had a strong sense about the ways that people who are considered different get treated.

I was raised Unitarian Universalist, and I came to associate my church with social justice. In Ohio, we held signs by the side of the road when the state pushed to pass legislation defining marriage as between a man and a woman. In Tennessee, reproductive justice marches started and ended at my church. So I had an early understanding that the church is a place not only to experience awe and beauty and wonder, but also to struggle for liberation.

Religious institutions need to be at the border, on street corners, and in the courtroom. That’s how we become life-giving sources of affirmation and justice for those who turn to religion to find their moral compass, or in times of crisis and hardship. We have to model taking risks. As clergy, I can risk arrest in ways that most people can’t: my future is not affected by an arrest for civil disobedience on my record.

I’ve come to understand that there’s a spiritual shift we all have to go through with activism—from seeing injustice as something “out there” to “that’s *my* family.” That spiritual shift is what moves people to get involved: “I will fight for you because you are my parents, my brothers, my sisters, my neighbors, my friends, my children.”



*“There is no greater near-term threat to humanity than nuclear weapons. That’s where I have to focus my energy.”*

## National and Global Security

**STEPHEN YOUNG '85** advises presidential administrations and members of Congress as a senior analyst for the Union of Concerned Scientists' (UCS) Global Security Program in Washington, D.C. His advocacy focuses on arms control, nuclear weapons policy, and nuclear threat reduction programs—with the ultimate goal of eliminating all nuclear weapons. Before joining UCS, Young was deputy director of the Coalition to Reduce Nuclear Dangers, a national alliance of 17 nuclear disarmament organizations.

My father was a minister. In the early '60s we were living in Kentucky, where I was born. He was helping the coal miners organize, and we were living in a house that belonged to a member of my father's church. When the church member heard that my father was helping the unions, he kicked us out of the house. I was too young to remember that moment, but there is a call to activism that runs through my family.

These are the primary arguments for getting rid of nuclear weapons: They're morally reprehensible and can kill people quickly in mass numbers. They should be abolished for humanitarian reasons. They're never going to be useful for the military. The United States is also better off in a world without nuclear weapons. We are *the* global superpower, and the only direct threat to us is a nuclear attack. That is the only war for our land we can lose. We would all be safer in a world where nuclear weapons do not exist.

People understand that nuclear weapons are dangerous, yet they feel that having them makes us safer. People also understand that one person—the president—controls nuclear Armageddon. But I've been asked, “Well, what can *I* do about that? It's the president!” So activists like me keep raising the issue, trying to find an empowering tool so that reasonable fear can turn into real action. That's my challenge.



*“I kept seeing the problems in my farming community and asking, ‘Where is the next generation?’”*

## Food and Farming

**MATTHEW FITZGERALD '14** cofounded the Central Minnesota Young Farmers Coalition, a group of roughly 40 next-generation farmers who build community partnerships and advocate for legislative action in rural communities. Earlier this year, the group successfully pushed through the Minnesota legislature a \$12 million bill that gives landowners a state income tax credit when they sell or rent land to a new farmer. Fitzgerald grew up on his family's farm near Hutchinson, Minnesota, and now owns a farm about 10 miles from there.

There were hardly any other farm kids at Carleton. I was probably a novelty or an oddity, but I took pride in it. People often make assumptions about what rural folks look like and think like. It goes both ways. In my hometown, people wondered what I was doing in college and where Carleton was located, even though it's only an hour and a half away.

In college I enjoyed studying about power and people, and that landed me a social justice fellowship in Seattle, where I worked on immigration issues. I loved it. I was excited by the work, but I had so many blind spots. That's when the seed was planted: “What can I do in Minnesota?”

I began working for Thrivent right out of college. Then my dad was rediagnosed with lymphoma and it was one of those *everything stops* moments. I knew I had to move home to the farm to support my family. It was like the universe was pulling me back. I was there for a year and a half as my dad got better. When the opportunity to purchase my own farm came up in December 2016, I did it. It was the accumulation of several small moments. I realized that in order to have an impact, I should work in a community that I understood and cared about.

I'm an organizer by training and a farmer by circumstance. But connecting people is my passion, so I started reaching out to other young farmers in the area. Fewer than 3 percent of Minnesota farmers are under 35. The national average is 6 percent. What does the future look like for us?

I helped create the Central Minnesota Young Farmers Coalition. Most of us had never done policy organizing before. But there we were, setting up appointments in St. Paul, getting our talking points ready, sitting with Republicans and Democrats, and testifying before the legislature about tax credits for farmers.

The concept of tax credits had been around for 10 years, but young farmers had never led the charge. I knew that we had to shake up how everyone was talking about the issue. Youthful energy really can make a difference. Everyone has a community from which they come. It's up to you to figure out how to apply that strength and knowledge for the betterment of your community.



*“In my work, there is no room for imperfection. You are literally dealing with life and death.”*

## Suicide Prevention and Mental Health

For almost 30 years, EVE MEYER '64 has been executive director of San Francisco Suicide Prevention. The oldest organization of its kind in the country, it provides emotional support, education, assistance, and intervention through community outreach and 24-hour crisis lines. Meyer successfully convinced the Golden Gate Bridge, Highway, and Transportation District board of directors—appointed representatives from several counties who oversee bridge issues—to install physical deterrents for jumpers. After years of debate, construction began this year.

My parents were suicidal. They were Holocaust survivors and they were suffering. In the middle of the night, awful memories would come back to them.

I've always felt at *home* doing this work. I instinctively know what to do. Before you ask people *why*, you ask them *how*. “How do you plan to kill yourself?” Then you say, “Can you put that away or give it to someone?” Then you give them something for the pain, a safety plan.

The principle behind suicide prevention is that no one should hurt enough to want to die. And yet suicide is so stigmatized. Just the other night, someone told me: “Well, if people want to kill themselves, there’s nothing we can do.” Stopping them *is* what I do.

We get 200 calls a day. That’s how prevalent suicide is. These are people who are not seeing therapists, who don’t want anyone to know they’re hurting. They don’t want to call attention to their pain.

When I started talking to the Golden Gate Bridge board of directors 25 years ago, I was told that they would never, *ever* put up a physical deterrent. About 50 people jump successfully every year; 150 to 250 are stopped before they jump. They said we could not “call attention to suicide” with a barrier. Someone would always argue that people could get around the physical deterrent, so why do it? Finally, a couple of women got on the board, and they said, “Why does a deterrent have to be 100 percent effective? Birth control isn’t 100 percent effective, but we still use it.” It reframed the conversation.

As a society, we have to learn about pain—what a force it is and what a force each of us can be to others by relieving it. Just letting someone know that the pain is there and having that person say “*I acknowledge your pain*” is an important step. Suicide is not a thing that happens to a mythical *them*. It’s a phenomenon that involves all of us.



*“I want to get rid of the disparities and inequities in this country. To do that, we need to build mass pressure.”*

## Social Justice and Economic Inequality

ROBIN WONSLEY '13 is a community organizer and union activist with Socialist Alternative and Black Lives Matter. She recently led outreach efforts as a member of 15 Now Minnesota, a group that successfully pushed for passage of a \$15 minimum wage in Minneapolis. At Carleton, Wonsley earned a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship to research mass incarceration and reintegration programs in several countries.

I grew up on the South Side of Chicago. Our community is highly segregated—an immense amount of inequity and concentrated poverty. I saw how violence sprung out of people, simply because they had less to survive on, no stable job to go to. Yet not even 10 miles away in the north end of Chicago, people can walk freely without fear of violence. It felt like two completely different worlds to me.

To go from a 99 percent black high school in a predominantly poor black community to a college in a small town in southern Minnesota was another form of culture shock. Suddenly I was in a classroom with peers who didn’t know what it was like to have a relative in prison or who had never visited a prison—something I had done for 16-plus years—who never heard a gunshot, who never were financially unstable.



*“It’s common for corporations to say, ‘We’re just providing the goods that you are demanding. You can’t blame us.’ But it’s not a level playing field.”*

How are we going to engage with each other?

Then comes the feeling that you don’t belong. Yet you still crave community. So I got involved with Black Student Alliance. I worked at TRIO [which supports low-income and first-generation students and students with disabilities]. I started organizing events on campus. You find others who are doing the same thing. “Hey, I’m doing this weeklong coalition event. You gonna help me with it?” Yep. “Hey, I’m leading a social justice conference. You gonna be on a committee?” Yep. That’s how it worked.

After Carleton I researched incarceration issues on a Watson Fellowship, and it all started to come together on a macro level. If we invest more in education, health care, and housing—if we create a society that tends to people’s basic necessities through the equitable allocation of resources—there could be a breakthrough.

How can you release people from prison to the South Side of Chicago without stable jobs, health care, and housing, and expect them to successfully “reintegrate”? No, you’re setting people up to fail.

I didn’t know how I could contribute to movements like Black Lives Matter or Socialist Alternative, so I just started by showing up. Then it became clear that I needed to do more than show up. With the 15 Now minimum wage movement in Minneapolis, people who were working two jobs and had families still came out at night to get signatures. They didn’t see themselves as protesters. They were trying to change their immediate living conditions. They want good schools. They want to be able to afford rent. They want their taxes to bring more resources into their communities. It takes ordinary people to create change.

## Climate Change and Environmental Effects

**BEN CUSHING '12 is a campaign representative with the Sierra Club in Washington, D.C., leading the organization’s challenges to corporate and financial sector investments in oil and gas pipeline projects. He works with supporters to address climate change and promote transition to clean energy. Before joining the Sierra Club, Cushing had a one-year fellowship with the Green Corps Field School for Environmental Organizing, which trains organizers and leads grassroots campaigns across the United States.**

Though it may sound like a cliché now, Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth* documentary was a big moment for me. It came out when I was starting to think about where I wanted to go to college and what I wanted to study. I remember leaving the theater and saying to my family, “Fighting climate change is what I want to do with the rest of my life.”

At Carleton, I spent a lot of time learning about environmental issues and absorbing policy. I went to work as a research assistant at a public policy company in Boston thinking that I wanted to produce the best data to inform the decision makers. But I realized pretty quickly that our approach—trusting people in power to make the right decisions based on neutral information—felt disconnected from where change actually happens. I was looking for more passion. Where were the people?

My Green Corps fellowship took me first to Grand Rapids, Michigan, to work on a campaign to stop Kellogg’s from bulldozing rainforests in Indonesia for palm oil to use in your Frosted Flakes. We organized a statewide rally at Kellogg’s headquarters in Battle Creek, Michigan. About a hundred people showed up. We were pretty happy. Hey, it got on the local news! Then an Associated Press reporter picked it up and the story spread everywhere—*New York Times*, *Newsweek*, *Washington Post*. That got Kellogg’s attention. We eventually convinced them to sign a no-deforestation policy. It was eye opening: Wow. This works.

But I’ve also learned that not everyone is coming to these issues from the same place. I grew up in a liberal household in Oakland, California. I understand that my values and my reasons for doing this work can be totally different from the way someone else sees climate change and environmental issues. My job is to try to find entry points for people to engage where they are and to make an impact. ♡