



PHOTO BY GRETA BELL, BS '22

## TAKING ACTION to Protect the Planet

**Environmental activist Justin Thompson is working to make the world a better place for future generations.**

BY JAN SENN

“Let Our Powers Combine!” If you’re a millennial—or watched children’s TV shows in the early 1990s—that expression may ring a bell. It’s a catchphrase from *Captain Planet and the Planeteers* (also known as *The New Adventures of Captain Planet*). The animated series featuring an environmentalist superhero ran for 113 episodes from 1990 to 1996.

The brainchild of entertainment mogul and environmental philanthropist Ted Turner, the series was created as a way to teach children about real-world

environmental crises like deforestation, oil spills, pollution, global warming and nuclear waste. It features five teens from across the globe who unite their powers to summon Captain Planet and defend the Earth from environmental devastation. The popular cartoon influenced a generation of millennials to care about environmental causes.

One of those millennials is 31-year-old Justin Thompson, AS '20, a first-generation, nontraditional student who earned an associate degree at Kent State Ashtabula and is now at the Kent Campus doing a double major in environmental

studies and political science with a concentration in public policy and triple minors in geology, geography and urban studies. He recently was accepted into the McNair Scholars Program, which prepares first-generation and underrepresented students for doctoral study.

“Ted Turner saw a need to educate youth on the environment and to fight pollution and polluters—and it worked,” says Thompson, who credits the cartoon series and a childhood struggle with seasonal allergies with sparking his interest in air and water quality, as well as other environmental issues.

Involved in many community organizations and programs related to the environment, Thompson is president of Kent State’s Future Environmental Professionals Club. It aims to create a better understanding of environmental consulting and its role in protecting the environment and community. The club recently invited Carolyn Harding—host of the GrassRoot Ohio radio/podcast and a progressive candidate for the Ohio House of Representatives—to speak on Zoom about environmental and civic podcasting and why it’s important to elect officials who stand up for the environment.

“I wanted students to see that podcasting, films and other forms of media are also areas they could go into as an environmental professional,” Thompson says. “And we need more people who care about the environment to run for office.”

However, Thompson—who is graduating in December with Departmental Honors from the Honors College—isn’t interested in running for office himself. “I don’t want to be on stage, that’s not me,” he says. “But I have no problem helping others get elected and helping them work on policies to enact.”

In addition to his classes at Kent State, on weekends he’s recently completed a two-month Campaign Staff Academy through LEAD Ohio, a comprehensive training program for current and future campaign managers and staff. He also participated in a 10-month Environmental Justice Academy in the Miami Valley through the US Environmental Protection Agency, which helps participants cultivate skills to address local environmental concerns.

Thompson, who is the environmental climate justice chair for the NAACP in Ashtabula, has been working with the organization on legislation for Ohio regarding the regulation of fracking waste. He addressed the topic in his senior honors thesis—“Is Ohio Violating the Great Lakes Compact?”—which investigated the water depletion that results from oil and gas exploration throughout the Great Lakes Basin. His research suggests there may be evidence to support civil litigation and/or the proposal of new regulations to protect

this source of fresh water, which provides drinking water to more than 40 million people in the US and Canada.

This summer, in an internship through Kent State, Thompson will work with the NAACP to identify Ohio legislators who may be receptive to sponsoring legislation that would regulate fracking. They will also consider when best to introduce it. “Fracking is not the best topic to introduce just before an election because it’s so polarizing,” Thompson says. “We recognize that with the makeup of Ohio’s Legislature, we’re never going to be able to ban

fracking. So that’s not what we’re trying to do. We’re trying to make it safer—to protect the water, to protect the people.”

Through his years of volunteering for environmental organizations, Thompson says he’s realized that it is the larger state actors that effect real change. “If you want to make a difference in the world on a large scale, it’s the policies that need to be changed,” he says. “You can incentivize people to do things individually, but the individual contribution in terms of pollution and climate change is fairly small in comparison to the systemic polluters. And once you do something on

a large scale, it affects the individual as well.”

So Thompson—who also is on the executive committee of the Ashtabula County Democratic Party—encourages people who are concerned about climate change to vote for officials who prioritize the environment and to vote with their dollars when it comes to making consumer and investment decisions. “For example, we should be looking at the supply chains to see if companies are following sustainable practices,” he says. “We could negotiate with our energy providers to purchase energy from renewable resources as opposed to coal and natural gas. And if we’re investing in the stock market, we should see if those companies get their energy from fossil fuels or through wind and solar.

“Recently Gen Zs and millennials are calling for institutions to divest from companies that are invested in fossil fuels,” he adds. “Instead of just looking at the bottom line of profit, we want institutions to look at the triple bottom line: people, planet, profit. That’s something we could do at Kent State, too. Students can advocate for that change to happen. But it’s not going to happen if nobody calls for it.”

No doubt, Captain Planet would agree. ⚡

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