



Powerful Ideas, Practical Actions

Meet 15 Extraordinary People Transforming the Way We Live

The YES! Breakthrough 15: The justice warriors, eco-innovators, happiness architects, and change artists who are shattering our sense of powerlessness.

by [Madeline Ostrander](#)

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We live in a moment when it is hard to have faith in the power of an individual, unless that individual has money, or celebrity, or both. The average cost of a successful campaign for Senate in 2010 was \$9.8 million, while the median household income is around \$50,000. The federal lobbyist population is nearly 12,000, according to the Center for Responsive Politics; meanwhile *The New York Times Magazine* reports that it's so hard for citizen groups to bend the ears of federal politicians they sometimes enlist the help of the glamorous—Nicole

Kidman, Natalie

wonder ordinary Americans have rarely felt more powerless, more disillusioned with government, or less capable of slamming the brakes on our nation's course toward economic ruin.

Portman, George Clooney—just so they can get a meeting. It's no

And then a story breaks into the news that for a moment shakes our cynicism—such as when thousands of people camp out in a park near Wall Street and in public spaces across the country and insist that we, the ordinary folk who make up 99 percent of the population, have voices, faces, stories, and, most importantly, power of our own.



This issue is dedicated to the power of the 99 percent—and to a group of people who aren't looking for leadership from those with entrenched wealth and influence. For a decade and a half, YES! has covered the solutions and movements that answer the economic, environmental, and political challenges our world faces. In this issue, we're marking our 15th anniversary by turning our attention to 15 individuals behind those movements.

We have named them the YES! Breakthrough 15—a group of people who are shattering our sense of powerlessness.

We believe it's never been more important to recognize how influential ordinary people can be. Our representatives, under the influence of campaign contributions from companies like Koch Industries and Bank of America, are making a mess of things. Scientists predict we're headed toward climate disaster and severe food shortages that will affect half of the world's population, but Congress has stalled every effort to pass climate-change policies. The government has given banks trillions of dollars in bailouts and unsupervised loans while cutting services to millions of people without jobs or health care. Three-fourths of the public feels that the country is heading in the wrong direction. It's high time for us to take matters into our own hands.

The Power of Personal Stories

Not that it will be easy. For those of us without wealth and status, power has to come from somewhere else. From humility, which allows us to draw inspiration from the strengths of others. From a willingness to dive in, make mistakes, tell the truth, and respond to what's in front of us—which looks more and more like a state of emergency. Author Margaret Wheatley writes in *Turning to One Another*, a book on hope and community, “In a crisis, the space is wide open for contribution ... People have a deep desire to help, so they perform miracles. We discover capacities we didn't know we had.”

Thousands of people all over the United States are responding to crises at every level. We chose a small group, just 15, not only to celebrate our years of magazine coverage but also so that we could invite you into their lives. There is strength that comes from knowing one another's stories. Personal stories remind us that others face the same difficulties and vulnerabilities we do. We discover our own power when we realize we aren't alone and recognize humanity all around us.

We chose these 15 people because each offers a solution, an idea, or a vision that is bold enough for the time we live in now. We required each to be a present-moment leader—not someone resting on years of past accomplishment, but a person whose vision is still evolving. We wanted the 15 to represent movements and innovations that are ripe, vital, and urgent.

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We asked for a lot of help. We turned to nearly 70 longtime activists, authors, political leaders, scientists, artists, and storytellers—heroes and innovators themselves with deep roots in social change. We asked readers to send ideas. We reviewed more than 100 nominations: Each of them had a story that was powerful and evocative in its own right. From those many stories, we selected a group that spans multiple generations, cultures, communities, and issues. We wanted each to be a true innovator, an agent of what psychologist Robert Gass describes as transformational change. They are engaged in the radical reimagination of social systems and political structures. They hold a positive vision of possibility for the future, yet each is unafraid to do work that is messy and full of contradiction. They are not just thinkers but people deeply in touch with the heart of our current crises—and with the righteous anger, compassion, and love that moves people to take radical action. And they have enough humility to seek true collaboration—with dozens, hundreds, or thousands of other people.

We believe that, together, these 15 are driving some of the most important cultural shifts, solutions, and innovations that Americans will need to face the challenges of coming decades.

For example, we live in a time of deep political and economic polarization—and we will need to leap the divide. Ai-jen Poo, founder of the Domestic Workers Union, is someone who sees what Gass calls “creative tension” in “irreconcilable opposites.” She is battling for the rights of some of the most powerless and most essential workers in our economy—those who care for the sick, young, and elderly. But she has courted seemingly unlikely allies: By appealing to their ethics and compassion, she has led families who employ nannies, maids, and caregivers to march beside domestic workers in campaigns for worker rights. Poo calls it “organizing with love.”

We will have to get real about the sacrifices needed to get our society off fossil fuels before climate change dries our rivers, unravels our agriculture, and floods our coasts. Conventional wisdom claims Americans aren’t willing to give anything up, but activist Tim DeChristopher says sacrifice and radical action are a relief and a joy. When he put himself at risk and in prison to stop oil and gas drilling in Utah, his example was part of what inspired more than 1,200 people to get arrested in Washington, D.C., to try to halt the construction of an oil pipeline.

We will need to prove that a human-scale economy can grow without interference or backing from big finance. Since the collapse of American manufacturing, parts of the Rust Belt look like a dead zone. But in Detroit, 96-year-old Grace Boggs has inspired people living in the inner city to begin reconstructing the fabric of their neighborhoods—by creating gardens, making art, and rebuilding houses. Their work belies the idea that poor, urban communities are a lost cause.



HOW TO BREAK THROUGH:

"We think we have no power when in fact we have more than enough power." —[Tim DeChristopher](#)

And we will need the determination and persistence to put the “demos,” the people power, back in democracy. We will need people like Alison Smith, who was a stay-at-home mom when she began volunteering and eventually became a leader in a campaign that revolutionized election financing in Maine, providing public money to turn middle- and working-class people into competitive candidates for office. “All I really did is show up!” she says. “Then ... other doors opened. I spoke to groups, spoke to reporters, testified at the legislature. I never planned on doing those things ... on making this my life’s work. But I kept showing up because something about the work fed my soul.”

Most of all, the power and transformation we’ll need in this century will come from everyone with something to give, not just the few or the elite. The contributions of each of the Breakthrough 15 are, in the words of Smith, “just a tiny sliver of the whole endeavor, and all by itself it wouldn’t amount to much.” We offer you their stories as an invitation—to show up, to take heart, to nourish your imagination, to break through the cynicism and prove that we have enough power and creativity to build the world we need.



Madeline Ostrander wrote this article for **The YES! Breakthrough 15**, the Winter 2012 issue of YES! Magazine. Madeline is senior editor of YES!