



by Mara Johnson-Groh

XIUHTEZCATL MARTINEZ

ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVIST

Xiuhtezcatl (pronounced SHU-tez-caat) **Martinez** is a 16-year-old with big hopes for the Earth's future. Since he was 6, he has dedicated his life to the fight for global environmental health. By age 13, he had received a presidential award for his work and was selected as one of the leading youth changemakers by the Campaign for a Presidential Youth Council. Xiuhtezcatl, whose name means "Turquoise Mirror," has brought together youth from around the world to act as warriors defending our planet.

As the youth director for the Earth Guardians, an international organization of activists who work to create a sustainable future, Xiuhtezcatl leads kids and teens to take action and protect the Earth. In his work, Xiuhtezcatl has spoken to world leaders at United Nations assemblies around the globe, encouraging them to take steps against climate change. He has even helped take the federal government of the United States to court for supporting the use of fossil fuels, which harm the climate for future generations.

In addition to being an environmental activist and public speaker, Xiuhtezcatl composes hip-hop music with his younger brother, Itzcuahtli (EET-squat-lee). They write song lyrics with messages that inspire people to take action. They perform concerts at music festivals, demonstrations, and rallies. In his spare time, Xiuhtezcatl enjoys playing soccer, dancing, and hanging out with friends.

WHY DO YOU CARE ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE?

Climate change means a lot to our younger generation. It is one of the most important issues of our time. It's not just about the environment, or politics; it's about our future. As a young person growing up, I'm not just a climate-change activist, I am a big brother and an artist. There are a lot of people I love and care

about in this world, and there are a lot of things I'm in love with about this planet. And these things are going to be lost unless we can fight this problem that threatens all life on Earth. I want to make a difference and help with a problem that is so important to everyone.

HOW HAS CLIMATE CHANGE AFFECTED YOUR COMMUNITY?

In 2013, Boulder, Colorado, had a huge flood that destroyed a lot of homes. In the same summer, and many summers since then, we have had frequent forest fires. It wasn't always like this. Many forests now are also being destroyed by pine beetles. Since the temperature is warmer now, the beetles are not killed off in the winters, and they are able to kill more trees.

HOW DID YOU GET INTO WORKING WITH EARTH GUARDIANS? HOW DID YOU FIND YOUR VOICE?

I found my voice as a six-year-old kid who was seeing the world he was in love with fall apart. In the documentary *The 11th Hour*, I saw the destruction of the planet—cities washed away by the ocean tide, forests decimated, and species going extinct. I cried most of the night until I fell asleep, and when I woke in the morning I felt a profound need to tell everyone about what was happening to the Earth and that we were a part of that destruction. I told my mom I needed to



Heavy rain caused flash floods in Boulder, Colorado, in September 2013.



“I can feel the pain of the mother Earth and I know

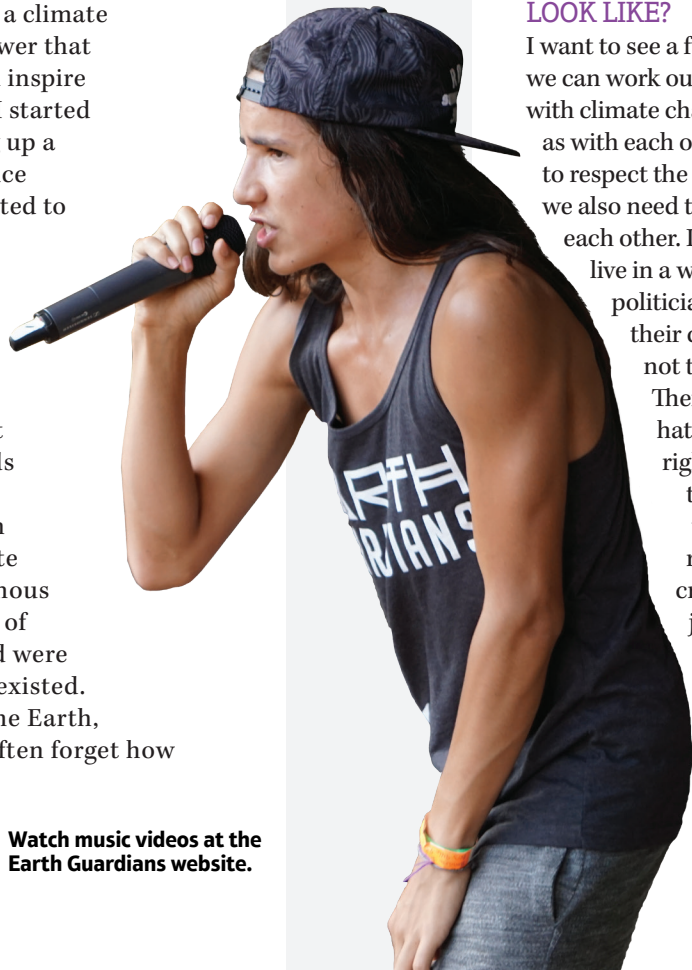
That when the sun fades away
and the lights burn low
I turn my head to the sky and
gaze into the stars
Is this why we’re really here, is
this who we really are?”

*from “Speak for the Trees,” written by
Xiuhtezcatl Martinez, on the album
Generation Ryse*

talk to people with such conviction that she started reaching out to the community to see if she could get speaking engagements for me. After my first speech, at a climate action rally with over 300 people, I felt the power that my voice had to wake people to our crisis and inspire them to make a difference. When I was nine, I started working with the Earth Guardians by starting up a crew in Boulder, Colorado. I knew that my voice could be stronger if there were more of us united to create change in our local community.

HOW DOES AN UNDERSTANDING OF AN INDIGENOUS WAY OF LIFE HELP IN YOUR WORK?

My dad is Aztec and I was brought up in that tradition. I learned all life is sacred and needs to be protected. My background has helped me understand my personal connection with the Earth, and it has also made me passionate about indigenous rights issues. As an indigenous person, I have the responsibility to take care of the land. The indigenous peoples of this land were the original activists, before that word even existed. The truth is, we all have a responsibility to the Earth, but it’s just not taught in all traditions. We often forget how beautiful nature is.



WHAT DO YOU WANT THE EARTH’S FUTURE TO LOOK LIKE?

I want to see a future where we can work out our issues with climate change as well as with each other. We need to respect the Earth and we also need to respect each other. I want to live in a world where politicians work for their communities, not their wallets. There is a lot of hate in the world right now, hate that leads to violence, racism, and crime. If we can just turn that hatred into love, our world would already be a better place.

Watch music videos at the Earth Guardians website.



Brothers Itzcuahtli and Xiuhtezcatl Martinez work together as songwriters and performers.



HOW CAN WE MAKE AN IMPACT IN OUR OWN COMMUNITIES?

It can feel scary, but there is so much hope in our future. Everyone has the ability to create change. And it does not have to just be big things—even small steps help. You have to be the change and live the change you want to see in the world, to paraphrase Mahatma Gandhi. It's really up to you to make that change. We have the power! We also need to change the way we think about climate change. It's not just an environmental problem. It's connected to everything—the people, our cultures. Everything in our world is connected. By understanding that connection, we can make big impacts with small changes.

WHAT PROJECTS ARE YOU WORKING ON RIGHT NOW?

I am working on a big music project with my brother who is an incredible lyricist—he has a lot of talent! Our most recent album, *Break Free*, came out in January 2017. I'm really excited about our music right now. I feel like it can reach a wider audience. It helps people feel passionate about climate change.

WHAT DO YOU WANT YOUR LEGACY TO BE?

I want to leave behind a legacy that shows I did everything I could possibly do. I want people to remember that I fought my hardest to make the future a better place for my generation and the ones after. We owe it to future generations to be leaders today and to take care of our land, air, and water.

Mara Johnson-Groh is an astronomer who writes for NASA. She has studied planets around other stars and has yet to find one half as awesome as Earth.



BRIGHTER TOGETHER

Xiuhtezcatl Martinez believes if we all help out in the little ways, we can make the Earth's future brighter. If you're interested in learning more about the Earth Guardians, or becoming a part of the movement, visit www.earthguardians.org.