

Petrice Jones (00:03):

Welcome to 52 Hertz: The Lonely Whale podcast. I'm your host, Petrice Jones. Twice a week. I chat with the entrepreneurs, activists and youth leaders going against the current to rethink the approach to plastics and environmentalism on a global scale. Today, my guest is Steff McDermott. Steff is a young leader from the Cayman Islands and a founding member of Sail For Climate Action, a project pioneered by youth from Latin America and Europe. Steff goes against the current working to elevate the often ignored voices in the global south and strengthen bonds across the Atlantic Ocean. We'll talk to Steff and find out what sailing through the Bermuda Triangle taught her about culture, race and history in the context, environmental activism, social justice, and leadership. I'm your host, Petrice Jones. Welcome to 52 Hertz: The Lonely Whale podcast.

Petrice Jones (00:50):

But first some good news from around the reef. Records suggest that around 27,000 humpback whales thrived in the South Atlantic in the 1830s, but by the 1950s, however, that number have been reduced to less than 500. That's five, zero, zero. Let's just take that in for a second. But the good news is thanks to the 1986 ban on commercial whaling and the creation of marine protected area, humpback whales have been making a comeback in recent years. In fact, humpback whale populations have soared back into historic numbers. As of a 2019 study conducted by scientists from Brazil, the United States and the United Kingdom, there are estimated 25,000 humpback whales swimming in the South Atlantic again. This is incredible evidence of the power of nature to restore itself if it is given the opportunity to do so. And that is some bloody good news.

Petrice Jones (01:47):

Welcome to 52 Hertz: The Lonely Whale podcast. I'm your host, Petrice Jones. Today, my guest is Steff McDermott. Steff is an environmental activist and the co-founder of Sail For Climate Action. She's a young leader and has pushed the boundaries on activism and environmental legislation. Today, we'll be talking about leadership and the impacts of cultural and racial differences on environmental activism. So Steff, welcome to the show. Thank you for being here.

Steff McDermott (02:09):

No, thank you for having me. I really appreciate it that you've given us this space to get this message across.

Petrice Jones (02:17):

Of course. Of course. So Steff, I'd love for you to just tell everybody a little bit about yourself. How old are you? I know you are quite young and doing so much already. Just tell us a little bit about you and what you do.

Steff McDermott (02:27):

Yeah. First, can I ask you a question? I know that's a bit different, just to familiarize myself with who I'm speaking to, and also to fulfill my curiosity and to allow me to be more comfortable to flow of this conversation. So my question to you, Petrice, is who are you, but not the normal my age, this is what I do, this is where I work, but what are your dreams, what's your nickname and what are you fearful of and what do you hope to see happen in the future?

Petrice Jones (03:02):

Wow, you've definitely flipped the script on me. Well, who I am, I guess at the very core is if I answered that now versus maybe 10 years ago, I'd say I'm a young man who's trying to take on the biggest problem he can bear on his shoulders and go forth and serve the world as well as he can. Beyond that, I'm an actor and aspiring environmental activist or change maker. What am I scared of? I'm scared of unfulfilled potential. That's probably my biggest one. Yeah. That's probably at the heart of it. Does that give you a little insight into me?

Steff McDermott (03:48):

Yeah, no, I appreciate that. Thank you. Because Google doesn't give us the most information.

Petrice Jones (03:58):

Okay, great. Well, then I guess, same to you then, the same question. Today is about you and your story and yeah, we'd love to hear more about you.

Steff McDermott (04:06):

Okay. Well, one thing I'm afraid of is injustice, as in, I hate to see that when people are suffering unfairly and it's not their fault when this happens and we see this in climate change, you see this in climate action and you see this right now with the COVID-19 crisis. What I mean is that a lot of people, especially young people, their positions that they're in is not their fault. This can be due to the financial situation their parents are in. This can be due to simply where they were born and many different circumstances. And it hurts to see, as you said, this unfulfilled potential. It hurts to see that these young people have so much potential and they have so many ideas, but they lack resources to be able to implement said solutions or to implement action.

Petrice Jones (05:10):

So, where do you feel like you fit into that then? Because I know a big part of what I hope to talk about today is your level of leadership and giving voices to those who are unheard. You know, it's not just the environment itself that can't speak up for itself, but there are individuals out there who don't have a voice who impacted in ways that people in the quote unquote global north just couldn't fathom. So how do you pose giving these voices to these young people

who have something to say without the platform to say it?

Steff McDermott (05:41):

First off, I don't think we can ever give someone their voice. I believe we have to empower other people to find their own voice. And I think this started for me in high school, because I went to a public school called John Gray High School and I'm lighter skin tone and most of the students there are darkened skin tone. And I was very much a troublemaker. No, we had a group. We would skip class and just cause a bit of trouble and do what we'd want. And that's when I first really experienced this injustice because all of my friends, we did the same activity that broke all these rules, but for some reason they were getting suspensions and I was getting off really quick and easy. There was never really any problems. So from then I would just kind of like take on the blame, but I'm like, why is this happening? Why am I not getting suspended here? What's happening? And then that's, I think when I first kind of experienced some racial discrimination and this unfairness.

Petrice Jones (06:40):

Right, right. That's so interesting. So I want to get into that, but I actually want to just take it back a little bit and just actually talk about where you're from in general. You say where you went to school, but if I'm not mistaken, you're from the Cayman Islands, correct?

Steff McDermott (06:53):

Yes. So I'm from the Cayman Islands and that's in the Caribbean. It's to the Southwest of Cuba and Southwest of Jamaica. So we're a little speck on the map.

Petrice Jones (07:06):

But a beautiful spec of that though.

Steff McDermott (07:10):

Yes.

Petrice Jones (07:11):

What are the Cayman islands like?

Steff McDermott (07:14):

So the Cayman Islands is made up of three islands. Grand Cayman, Cayman Brac and Little Cayman and it is a melting pot of cultures and nationalities. We have over 133 nationalities represented on the island and it is a very, very beautiful island just as any island in the Caribbean. But one thing that kind of separates this island is how developed we are and Americanized we are. We're very globalized and a lot of other Caribbean people don't refer to Cayman as being part of the Caribbean. And when I traveled so for climate action, I understood why, because we have large, beautiful buildings. We have all of these hotels and condos and we have a lot of roads, have no potholes and you

don't see people on the streets begging for money. You don't see people on the streets period. You don't see much litter on the streets.

Steff McDermott (08:14):

But when I went to these other Caribbean islands, like Jamaica, for example, that's when I saw a lot of poverty and a lot of differences in the infrastructure of the roads and the buildings and access to different shops and materials. And in the same thing when we visit Haiti, it was very eye opening for me to really understand why and how Cayman stands up. And I think if you look back in our history, we will understand why, colonization and so on and that the Cayman Islands is still a colony with the UK crown and because of that, we have a little bit more, I guess, leverage, but for laws and policies and us being a financial center, that definitely separates us. So Cayman is a very wealthy country, but I notice in America, the USA, they think that Cayman is all about money laundering. That's not the case. A lot of strict rules and protocols and regulations to the point that some banks are complaining about these regulations.

Petrice Jones (09:19):

Right. So you feel that because of the development of the Cayman Islands, it's almost considered not to be a Caribbean Island itself.

Steff McDermott (09:29):

I think it's wrong to have that viewpoint, but I can see why some people would say that and believe that.

Petrice Jones (09:37):

Right. So what do you love about the Cayman Islands and how has it changed over the years? I mean, you're what? You're 19 now, Steff?

Steff McDermott (09:44):

Yeah. I'm 19. So yes, I'm still very young. I have to remind myself, I'm only 19.

Petrice Jones (09:51):

19 years young.

Steff McDermott (09:52):

When I was 16, I was like, "I'm only 16, I'm only 16, because I'm always rushing to grow up and to be an adult, but it's golden.

Petrice Jones (09:59):

Hey, trust me. I'm talking like I'm really old. I'm 26. And don't worry. Just enjoy your youth while you can, because my knees are going. It's all going south from here, Steff. Trust me. But yeah. So tell us about how has the Cayman Islands changed over your sort of short 19 years?

Steff McDermott (10:18):

So first I'd like to talk about the Marine environment because my family is from Cayman Brac and Cayman Brac is still very much island vibe. There's no globalization going on there. There's no fast food chains and so on. It's very much untouched. In regards to marine life, I remember ironshore, and ironshore is fossilized coral that's on the coast and there would be lots of whelks and a whelk is a kind of sea snail that people eat. And we used to go get whelks right out there. Now there's no more whelks at all and it's just overgrown of algae. Even the coral has degraded to the point where it's just so much algae and there's a reef further down to the right and my brothers and I and my dad, we would go there growing up. And now with my brother and I, we go out there and we're like, "Where are the lobsters?" There's barely any more out here. They've gone deeper in water and they're smaller in size.

Steff McDermott (11:16):

Oh. And the most important change has happened is the plastic pollution. Petrice, I cannot express how bad plastic pollution has gotten. I mean, we used to have a clubhouse and play survival out in the bush. And we were like, "Oh, what did the ocean bring us today," to go scavenge supplies. Very rarely will we get plastic in different items. But now at 19, I go out there to read my book to meditate. I'm just shocked at the amount of plastic and looking down at this cave and there's actual microplastic floating on the surface and I'm like, I've never seen this before and I grew up here, lived here for 17 years. Not once in my life have I seen plastic floating on the surface. That was very mind opening and just, it's crazy.

Petrice Jones (12:10):

How do you feel about that?

Steff McDermott (12:12):

It upsets me and that's why I do the work that I do. And that's why it's a little bit radical and extreme. And it's because I've seen these changes and if I'm only 19 and I have these memories from when I was eight years old or so, these changes have happened so drastically and yeah, it just fires me up and it motivates me to do what I can.

Petrice Jones (12:35):

Yeah. So let's talk about what you actually do because you've done a lot in the last couple of years trying to protect and serve your community and your planet. So let's talk about Sail For Climate Action and tell us all what that is all about.

Steff McDermott (12:49):

Sail For Climate Action is to raise the voices of Latin American and Caribbean youth activists across the Atlantic for climate action. And two months, we would be out at sea where we would work on capacity sharing programs, knowledge sharing programs, we would conduct

workshops and just learn from each other experiences and expertise. And in Europe, we were supposed to do a European tour going to eight different countries to meet with stakeholders, universities, scientists, researchers, politicians, parliament members. And we had this awesome program put together by an amazing team, by the way. This is a major team effort. We had people working remotely in Europe, Germany, in the Netherlands, in the UK, Columbia and Brazil. It was very much a team effort to make it happen. So on February 20th, we left Cartagena and we're all strangers, by the way.

Petrice Jones (13:50):

Who is we? How many people were there? Who are all of these people that are from all around the world?

Steff McDermott (13:56):

Yeah. So we had 20 participants. We had the Caribbean delegation at five members. They were from The Bahamas, Montserrat and Angola. And then we had a full Latin team, someone from Ecuador, Brazil, Peru, Honduras, Colombia, Argentina, and Uruguay. And of course we had a European team, someone from France, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands and the UK. So we had this very global team on board.

Petrice Jones (14:33):

What was the age range?

Steff McDermott (14:35):

It was from 18 to 32. [inaudible 00:14:38] from Ecuador was ...

Petrice Jones (14:39):

So you were one of the youngest then?

Steff McDermott (14:40):

I was the youngest. Yes. And not only was ...

Petrice Jones (14:43):

You were the actual youngest.

Steff McDermott (14:44):

Yeah, the youngest participant and the youngest core team member putting together this program and raising money. Yeah. And to be honest at first, that was very challenging. I'm not going to lie. In Cartagena, I felt very insecure about my age, my position and my role of the project, because we had all these amazing people with university degrees, people with jobs and professional people, especially the university degree thing, which really got me. So I felt very insecure at first, full honesty. But after mixing to come together, I realized that leadership has nothing to do with experience, an academic degree or even job experience. I think it's something that people are born with and it's something that shaped throughout time. And leadership is often about telling people what to

do or being the one dictating things that are happening. Leadership for me is ensuring that people have what they need to get the job done.

Petrice Jones (16:01):

Right. And what was that mission with everything had worked out the way you had intended? What was this end goal?

Steff McDermott (16:07):

To reach the United Nations Intersessionals in [inaudible 00:16:11] Germany where we were going to lobby against certain things and to lobby for certain solutions to come up. And the goal was while we're on the boat to develop these solutions together. And that was very much a challenge to find common ground and to define this unified message, because we realized like they say Latin American, the Caribbean, but we realized that there's so many differences with political systems, with the environment and different needs and wants and also different social classes and social economic issues. And let's talk about the language barrier. None of the Caribbean delegates could speak Spanish. And there's a few participants who didn't speak English. Communication doesn't have to be verbal. That's another major lesson that I learned.

Petrice Jones (17:05):

You'd mentioned there were some cultural clashes and prejudices that come from, not just these language barriers, but just these different backgrounds coming together in such a tight knit place. What happened on the ship when things started to unravel and these prejudices started to take place?

Steff McDermott (17:21):

I feel like a lot of the discrimination was very undertone and very minimum and it may not have been on purpose, and that's the issue with culture clashes because our cultures determines who we are. It determines our language. It determines our beliefs, our perceptions, and who we are and what we like to eat and so on. So when you have all these different diverse backgrounds and understandings of the world, there was a lot of clashes just because of the lack of understanding. There's certain people on the ship that had this sort of, I won't say negative energy, but definitely a bias was being shown through their body language and through their eyesight. And I don't want to point names or call anyone out, because I really don't want anyone to feel upset about this, but I want to be honest.

Steff McDermott (18:22):

With the Caribbean guys, now they're all young black men, young brown men. And at first the guys told me, "I think they're afraid of black people." And I'm just like, "What do you mean? Why?" And they're saying just a little odd, just body language. It's something that they can feel. It's not something that I can explain per se and I'm sure

many people can understand that feeling. Yes, these things were happening. And then there's just all this resentment going up against each other.

Steff McDermott (18:51):

So in order to combat this, we would hold certain workshops. We had a workshop called This Is My Reality where we are split into groups and each person in a group was able to express where they come from, the major problems that they're facing in that country and different solutions. And that tied us together a lot. When we had meetings and were able to express this stuff, it kind of made things better.

Steff McDermott (19:20):

And it wasn't until we were in Bermuda when we had this massive feeling session and that's when everything was just put out on the table. That's when the indigenous girls are finally able to speak up about their experiences. And as first time, the Caribbean boys also really spoke up and got everything off their chest. That's when we really connected and found common ground. And it was a very, very beautiful moment. There was lots of tears and some laughter and at the end of the day, we're all the same in regards to, we're all passionate young people who are fighting a bigger fight. So why are we fighting each other here?

Petrice Jones (20:02):

Right. Yeah, no, I think that's totally the truth and our solutions require more communication. And often we find ourselves prescribing solutions for countries and cultures that we don't understand. How do you feel, even activism in general, how privilege defines what people believe we should be doing to serve our planet?

Steff McDermott (20:21):

That's my major problem and my biggest fear is that this climate movement kind of lose credibility because exactly that. I truly believe if you're white and privileged and privileged in a sense that you don't have to worry about shelter, you don't have to worry about food, you have access to quality education, you have access to technology and not having to worry about finance. as well as safety and security, where you don't have to worry about your life. You don't have to worry about being abused physically or sexually. We need to understand that a lot of young people have to worry about this in the global south. You know, they have to be concerned about these basic needs that are not being met.

Steff McDermott (21:10):

And that's issue with in Cayman, for example, of environmentalism, a lot of private school students are the ones participating in and leading environmental movements. But you have to understand that some people have real life issues to worry about, so they can't really think about climate change or plastic pollution because they have to

worry where the next meal is coming from.

Petrice Jones (21:34):
How do you feel about that?

Steff McDermott (21:35):
I mean, if you don't have love for humanity, but call yourself an environmentalist, the world will never change. I've noticed in the environmental movement, within climate activists, there's so much love for the Amazon rainforest. There's so much love for the polar bears and for the coral reefs, but where's the love for humanity? Where's the love for each other and for humans? And until we have and express that love to each other and unite as individuals, only then can we really change the world for a better place. Only then can we really have environmental and climate justice, because the whole point of sustaining the environment is to sustain humanity and to sustain our societies. If we don't tackle the issues that we face in society, the world will never change.

Steff McDermott (22:39):
That's one thing I've noticed that's been missing in this movement is the love for humanity. If we don't tackle these issues that we face in society, which is racial discrimination. I mean, I want to refer to this Bob Marley song called War and almost all of the lyrics comes from a speech from the Emperor Selassie, the king of Ethiopia. And in the lyrics, he goes on to say that until no race sees themselves as superior to another race, there will never be justice. Until there's no second class and first class citizens, there will never be justice and there will continuously be war. And I think it's a very beautiful song that's so relevant right now of what's happening right now. And there's some of the beauties of reggae music as it call it rebel music, because it speaks about this kind of things. It speaks about revolutions and uprisings and it teaches people a different way to live.

Steff McDermott (24:00):
I just really hope that this movement and with Black Lives Matter, really wakes up climate activists and that they really start to assimilate, that they begin to unlearn their biases and their perceptions to accept their ignorance. And because honestly we're all ignorant and we're all tainted due to our perception because we have one experience. It is up to all of us to accept that we're ignorant and to unlearn what was previously engraved in us, because it's uncomfortable having these conversations about race, but I just really hope people are not becoming defensive about it and refusing to unlearn to learn. And I just really think it's important that right now we deconstruct to reconstruct the future.

Steff McDermott (24:57):
How do we solve this? Definitely through communication and

communicating to understand, not communicating to figure out a solution or not communicating to respond just to say you've spoken to this person and you're a supporter of them. Communicating to understand just to fulfill that curiosity and just to understand the differences.

Steff McDermott (25:25):

One of my biggest fears going to Europe was that a lot of our views and proposed solutions are very different to what the global north would propose or view and veganism was one of them and it was a major issue we faced on board because only one of the participants from the global south was really vegan. And in Jamaica, we had some KFC and it broke out this massive argument, this massive discussion and massive dialogue about food. And that's when we realized that this movement endorses and promotes vegan diets, veganism, but for people in the Caribbean, that may not be the most sustainable or best choice.

Steff McDermott (26:17):

Here in Cayman, our national dish is turtle stew, and we have a turtle farm, and I believe it's a lot more sustainable if we rely on this turtle meat that's being farmed locally and following our traditions and cultures, instead of importing beef from the USA. I think that's a lot more sustainable, but then there's this massive argument. No, no, no. We have to save the turtles. We love the turtles. Protect all the turtles, but that's pushed upon us without understanding that, wait, this is our culture. This is our national dish and there's a farm for it. So we're doing this sustainably.

Steff McDermott (26:55):

I kind of believe that there's a bit of Eurocentrism, I feel like if we go back to understand Caribbean history and colonization, so we can bridge this gap. If in these European history curriculums, this type of history is taught and not with the biases that we are the winners who've done something great. We discovered the Cayman Islands. Teaching indigenous history and teaching this pre-colonial history and also ancient African history so that everyone can understand what life was like for these people before that, to understand those cultures, understand those perspectives. And if you look at this historic actions, we can understand why this country's social economic status is where it is today. We can understand why their political systems are like that. And we can understand why their politicians behave like that. They say you guys had a 500 headstart in the race. It's so true. And we can learn that by looking at the history. And I feel like history is missing so much in this whole climate movement.

Petrice Jones (28:12):

Absolutely. You're absolutely right. History is missing in a lot of discussions that we have, not just related to environment, related to just about every issue that we face. We ultimately always try and look at what is right now, rather than looking at how we got there. You

could kind of describe it as trying to perform surgery before you diagnose the issue. And on that, I want to kind of take it a little bit back to the ship and understand how it all kind of flipped around based on the COVID-19 pandemic. Was it you making the decision to turn back?

Steff McDermott (28:45):

That was not an easy decision. And that was very, very emotional time. While we're sailing, we don't have access to internet. We are in our own little world and we finally got internet and wifi and that's when we learned that there was this global pandemic rolling out and we had a discussion as core team with the other core team members from Europe, and they're like, "Guys, the situation's escalating. What are you going to do?" And we decided to allow the participants to decide as to what they want to do. And everyone wanted to keep on moving forward. Everyone wanted to keep moving forward and I wanted to keep it moving forward as well. But I just had all these concerns because if France closed their borders and the next day Belgium closed their borders and everything was changing, so every day something changed, every couple of hours, something changed.

Steff McDermott (29:42):

I'm so concerned about this coronavirus. I'm not confident in the legality of it. I'm not confident in the visas. I didn't think this was responsible to keep on going, but my youth young, said, "Yeah, let's keep on going." And you're optimistic, but inside of me, I'm like, "Oh, is this responsible?" And then the next day, we all had a call and the European team were like, "Guys, we strongly advise you not to keep on moving forward." At that moment, that's when I decided that, you know what, we're suspending the project.

Petrice Jones (30:18):

Pulled the plug.

Steff McDermott (30:20):

Yeah, I can feel it now. I just felt it actually, the relief I felt. It literally felt as if weight was picked off of my chest. And I just like, oh. I was able to relax a little bit. And I remember looking at Claire and her eyes and her eyes were just filled of tears and it was such an emotional time for everyone, because we just had this amazing experience. We all just connected. There's this global crisis happening, this pandemic spreading around. After that, it was just sadness. And I'm the type of person that I try not to be very vulnerable and that's something that trip taught me was to be vulnerable and to be open. But man, I was so destroyed inside. So destroyed.

Petrice Jones (31:08):

It is. It's a very tough thing to put your heart and soul into something and then to have it almost just taken away from you,

something completely beyond your means. But if it's any consolation, it has no reflection on you guys' ability to go and get the thing done, because it really seems like you would, as a group, working out how to work with each other to get this thing done, even though you faced issues that you almost weren't expecting to face very early on. So it's still incredibly commendable, but you essentially, so you decided to end the voyage and return home and you had to quarantine by yourself then, I'm assuming, for two weeks?

Steff McDermott (31:46):

Yeah, that was very, very tough because we really became a family with arguments and love and laughter. So being separated and being in the hotel room by myself, have the police guards outside, it was tough. And I was so angry at myself. I was so upset at myself. I'm like, "Man, I could have been sailing right now. We could have flipped this," and we would have figured it out, you know, but I kept on reminding myself to get through was that this is temporary. And I need to allow myself to feel these feelings and just to remind myself that eventually I will find the positive aspect from this and eventually I will feel better about it. Now my takeaway of it, I think it's a blessing in disguise because now we can work together remotely where we have more resources, the internet, to put together our message, to speak with experts and to really make this stronger and better. It was a blessing in disguise, for sure.

Petrice Jones (32:54):

And how are you guys pushing forward now?

Steff McDermott (32:57):

So, we have a lot of exciting things in work. We have a team working on a podcast. We also have a team working on this manifesto and we are currently in the works with Klima Delegation, the German organization, and we're hopefully able to proceed with a new program that's mainly focused in Germany. Also, just to follow us on Instagram at Sail For Climate Action, because we may or may not have a film coming up. So we're working hard on this and we have a lot of things coming up.

Petrice Jones (33:36):

I'm so glad I got the honor of speaking to you and thank you for everything that you're doing, because even though the world didn't see what you guys were to achieve this time round, you are seen and you are appreciated. So thank you for everything that you're doing and everything you're going to continue to do.

Steff McDermott (33:54):

Thank you. I appreciate it a lot. So, thank you.

Petrice Jones (33:56):

Hey, listeners. Just before you go, here's a quick ocean saving tip for you from our guest.

Steff McDermott (34:02):

Educate yourself and connect your passion and career path with conservation. So if you love filmmaking, learn about an environmental issue in your local community and film about it. I mean, if you're a marketer, find an NGO who needs a marketer. If you're practicing to become a lawyer, start reading those policies and start lobbying and send emails. Oh, and send emails. Be curious and send emails. Just ask questions because the worst thing that can happen is they don't reply or they say no.

Petrice Jones (34:38):

52 Hertz is a podcast from Lonely Whale. Our show is produced by Emma Riley and Mindy Ramaker with writing from Kyrsten Stringer and audio engineering by James Riley. Special thanks to Young Hero, Emy Kane, Kendall Starkman, and Danny Witte. Subscribe to 52 Hertz wherever you get your podcasts. I've been your host, Petrice Jones. Thanks for listening. Until next time. Tune into 52 Hertz and tune out plastic.