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Rebel With a Cause: Masada Disenhouse and Saturday's People's Climate March San Diego

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Masada Disenhouse (center) at La Mesa Planning Commission in 2015 with Angela Deegan and Jean Costa. Photo via Facebook

By Ken Stone

Masada Disenhouse shares the name of the Judean Desert fortress where a first-century **Jewish rebellion** against the Romans ended in mass suicide.



Masada Disenhouse is a national coordinator with 350.org. Photo via LinkedIn

Now her life's work is averting mass extinction.

On Saturday, Disenhouse will help lead **People's Climate March San Diego** — one of three dozen **sister marches** in the state and more than 130 across the country (and dozens worldwide) anchored by one in Washington.

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“Roughly 2,000 people are currently RSVP’d,” she said of the **Waterfront Park event** west of the County Administration Center. “In 2014 [at the last climate march], we had about 700 people RSVP’d and had 1,500 show up.”

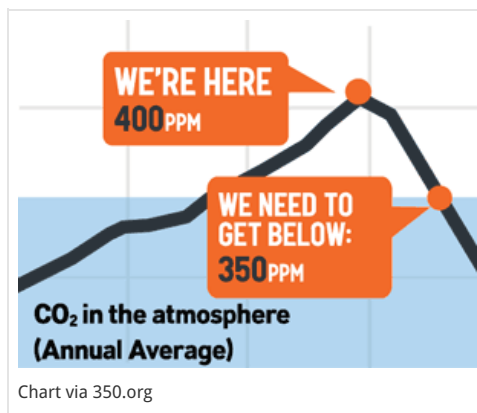
In light of the March for Science last weekend — where as many as 15,000 rallied downtown — is she concerned Saturday’s turnout might be anticlimactic?

“I think many people are coming out to [climate march] events for the first time and are really enthusiastic, and I think we’ll get a big turnout,” the La Mesan said via email. “We were at the science march and did a lot of flyering, so we’re hopeful many of those participants will also come to the climate march.”

Disenhouse, 48, the founder of climate action group **SanDiego350**, is a full-time organizing coordinator with **350.org** — its name derived from the goal of lowering the atmosphere’s 400 parts per million of carbon dioxide to a “safe” 350.

Born in Staten Island, she grew up mostly in New York City but lived in Israel between the ages of 6 and 12.

She recalls doing a lot of hiking and



camping and being encouraged by her family and schools to care for the environment, including animals, plants and health.

“I went to school in science thinking that I’d want to do research or policy work related to environmental issues, but discovered that while I did great at classes I am really not cut out for research (I’m not a very patient person).”






So she earned a master’s in physical chemistry at the University of Washington and worked for **Community Environmental Center**, a nonprofit in Queens that promoted energy efficiency and environmental conservation.

She helped weatherize low-income housing for a few years.

But when she read parts of the first report, in 1990, of the **Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change**, she said she was shocked “that the earth could be changing so dramatically because of human activity.”

In her 20s, she became an activist in local environmental and political causes. She later worked at UC San Diego for eight years and joined the opposition against **Proposition 23**, the 2010 ballot measure funded by oil companies that aimed to suspend California’s

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initial Global Warming Solutions Act, which required the state to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions.

“During the campaign, we held an event around 350.org’s 2010 day of action and then, after we won, I assembled folks from Prop. 23 and invited other environmental organizations to help organize an event around 350’s 2011 day of action,” she said.



Masada Disenhouse (far left) has been leading volunteer efforts for the April 29 People’s Climate March San Diego. Photo via Facebook

She was among 15 people that drew a crowd of about 400 people in Balboa Park to “listen to elected officials, energy experts and advocates to learn about climate change and how they could make a difference.”

That led to SanDiego350, an independent nonprofit affiliated with 350.org.

“Other than Environmental Health Coalition, which does wonderful work — in a small number of specific San Diego communities — no one was doing this in San Diego,” she said, “and we decided that even though we were a small scrappy group of volunteers that we could make a difference.”

SD350 became a 501(c)(3) in 2014 and today has a mailing list of 7,500, Disenhouse said, including a paid volunteer coordinator.

“We have a strong focus on climate justice and see our job not just to reduce carbon pollution, but to move policies to also address economic and other injustices (the people least responsible for climate change are those suffering the most from climate impacts).”

Helped by experience organizing SanDiego350, the national 350 in 2015 hired Disenhouse to serve as liaison to about 150 affiliated groups around North America.

Disenhouse was interviewed by email. This chat was edited for length.

Times of San Diego: How is the march organized? How many people involved in planning, fund-raising, publicity? Is San Diego 350 the lead organizer? What other groups involved?

Disenhouse: SanDiego350 is the lead organization on the march.

Several organizations joined a steering committee and did a lot of amazing work. These include Sierra Club San Diego, Alliance San Diego, Environmental Health Coalition, Surfrider, AFT, SEIU, Climate Action Campaign, the Catholic Diocese, the Islamic Center and others. Over 50 organizations have signed on as partners, helping to promote or otherwise support the effort (see peoplesclimatesd.org/coalition). The partner

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committee was responsible for defining our messaging, our demands, the event program.

SanDiego350 volunteers did the bulk of the organizing work, including reaching out to partner organizations, maintaining a website, doing on-the-ground promotion (flyering, putting up posters, phone-banking), fundraising, communications, march and rally logistics (sound, transportation, setup/cleanup, marshalls, check in, etc), and volunteer coordination (both ahead of the march, at the march, and for follow-up). We partnered on developing our art builds with Environmental Health Coalition.

How does one navigate city of San Diego red tape to organize such a march? What steps are involved? Costs of security?

It's not that complicated — free speech is allowed in public spaces. So we don't have a permit, are not paying for security (though we did pay for some additional insurance for the march), and are coordinating with several jurisdictional authorities (SDPD, Sheriff's Department, Port) and park staff to make sure we're all on the same page and everyone participating stays safe.

The challenges we've faced are much more along the lines of being able to organize a bunch of volunteers to pull together a complicated event effectively and raising sufficient funds to do a good job.

Does the Washington march have a hand in organizing the San Diego march?

The **People's Climate Movement** is a coalition effort. Being part of a national day of action is really a big boost because folks take it more seriously and want to be involved. The other really helpful thing the national organizations involved did is to encourage folks on their lists to participate in sister marches, including the one in San Diego via email blasts and social media posts. They also provided some resources, but because we've organized many big events we have our own past samples and experience to work from.

How many PCM T-shirts have you sold?

We just got our T-shirts and put them up online so folks can reserve them. So we've only sold a few so far. The [page is here](#) (we just set it up!)

We raised funds so far from sponsors — Dr. Bronner's and NextGen Climate — and climate warriors Climate Action Campaign, San Diego chapter of the California Solar Energy Industry Association, Environmental Health Coalition, Preserve Calevera, Sullivan Solar, United Domestic Workers (UDW)) and we also have been raising funds from dozens of individual donors ranging from \$5 to \$400 (yes, you can donate at peoplesclimatesd.org).

Funds have primarily been used to print flyers and posters, for logistical needs (sound, insurance) and for arts materials.

Besides local politicians mentioned in various press releases, what other "name" individuals are expected to speak at the march or attend?

The speakers list is at peoplesclimatesd.org/program. We invited Assembly Member Lorena Gonzalez Fletcher because she has introduced a bill to restructure SANDAG to better represent the needs of the most people in the county, hold SANDAG accountable, and reduce the greenhouse gas emission and air pollution associated with transportation.

San Diego City Council Member David Alvarez is a champion for climate action and will close out the program. Other speakers include the Rev. J. Lee Hill, Jr. (United Church of Christ), Scripps Institution climate scientist Prof. Jeff Severinghaus, amazing student

organizers from SDSU and UCSD (Willow Lark and Mukta Kelkar), Bobby Wallace of the Barona Band of Mission Indians, Kumeyaay Nation, City Heights community member Esperanza Miranda, an Environmental Justice Promotora (educator) with Environmental Health Coalition, and Jim Miller, chair of the Environmental Caucus of the San Diego-Imperial Counties Labor Council, vice president of the American Federation of Teachers Guild 1931, and a professor at City College.

A few other elected representatives and/or staff will also be in attendance.

Besides the White House, who is being addressed by this march? Is San Diego's Climate Action plan strong enough?

We are mobilizing people in San Diego County to join the climate movement moving forward and to take concrete action on these key issues right now:

- Call on Mayor Faulconer to start a **Community Choice [Energy]** program in order to achieve San Diego's commitment to 100 percent clean energy and create local green jobs.
- Call on our state legislators to support bills to achieve 100 percent clean energy by 2045 (SB 584) and to restructure SANDAG to enable greenhouse gas emissions reductions from our largest source — transportation (AB 805) — at the event we'll ask people specifically to contact Senator Toni Atkins to co-sponsor and actively support AB 805.
- Call on Sen. Dianne Feinstein to oppose Trump's efforts to defund the EPA and instead support full funding for the EPA and its efforts to address climate change.

How are you and march organizers persuading conservatives and independents to join the march?

We are not targeting our promotion by political affiliation. In general, marches and rallies are not a place to win over people on the fence. They're more a rallying cry for people who already understand the problem and want to demonstrate their support and demand action.

I think that's OK. I think that shifting opinion involves building trust and in-depth dialogue, something best done in other contexts. I will say that we do hope that getting the word out about our efforts in the media does enable us to reach people who don't already think climate change is a huge urgent issue, and make them think about and look into the issue because of the number of participants and our calls to action.

What concrete results do you hope for?

Our key goals for the march are:

1. Grow the climate movement. Get folks who are concerned about climate change to understand the urgency of the issue and their ability to be part of the solution, and to urge them to be active in the climate movement going forward. The march will lay the groundwork for organizing – we're committing the necessary resources (volunteer time) to do the hard work to follow up with march participants and work with them one on one to find the best way they can participate in our ongoing work – whether that's policy advocacy, public education, coalition building, working with faith groups, outreach, volunteer development, or any of the other work we do.

2. Educate: Inform a broader swath of San Diegans about local and national climate change issues and solutions through media coverage, social media, and general buzz around the event.

3. Build coalition: strengthen our connections and intersectional work with other justice movements.

4. Build volunteerism: Engage volunteers and build their skills through the work that goes into organizing an event of this size.

By doing these things, we can build our ability to influence political will at all levels to get the policy changes we seek.

What else should readers know about the march or your role in it?

We will have really stunning art work made by volunteers — including puppets, huge banners, butterflies, sunflowers, parachute banners and really creative signs.

We'll have some great music from Veracruz Blues, the Peace and Freedom Choir and Peggy Watson.

We'll have some great activities, including a kid zone, a sign contest (judged by college students), and tables where folks can visit our partners and learn more about their work and volunteering opportunities. Participants are welcome to bring a bagged lunch to enjoy at the park.

We REALLY encourage people to travel by transit or bike as parking will be extremely limited. The Coaster is unfortunately not running on Saturday (due to maintenance), so we recommend travel by trolley or bus. Information is at <http://peoplesclimatesd.org/about/getting-there/>.

We'll also have a staffed bike corral so folks arriving by bike can park their bikes safely while they march.

I'm in awe and incredibly appreciative of the many volunteers and partner organizations who've put many hours into making this march a huge success. It's a privilege to work with these individuals and groups to coordinate an event like this. I hope folks have found it a rewarding learning experience.

I hope readers will be at the march so they can get motivated and learn about how they can be involved in grassroots climate action.

People's Climate March Dan Diego is at Waterfront Park, 1600 Pacific Highway. The rally begins at 10 a.m. and march at 11 a.m. along a one-mile loop east on Ash, south on Pacific Coast Highway to Broadway, west on Broadway, then right (north) onto Harbor Drive back to the park.

REBEL WITH A CAUSE: MASADA DISENHOUSE AND SATURDAY'S PEOPLE'S CLIMATE MARCH SAN DIEGO was last modified: April 28th, 2017 by Ken Stone

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