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Power in numbers

Students gather on national stage to fight for clean energy

Mar 5, 2009

By Kerry Kong

After finishing three consecutive exams last Friday, Brian Atkinson rushed to the parking lot ready to travel. Armed with nothing more than a backpack and a big resolve, his goal was the same as that of his fellow carpoolers -- to storm Capital Hill in hopes of making an impact on global climate change.

Some 50 Ohio University students converged on Washington, D.C., for the four-day Power Shift 2009 conference that concluded Monday. The event brought together 10,000 young people from across the nation in a rally for clean energy solutions.

"Power Shift is one of the biggest environmental events in history," said Atkinson, who coordinated the trip through the campus' Student Sierra Coalition. "You are meeting people from all over the country and even all over the world. It's pretty stressful to coordinate all these, but it's worth it."

Power Shift 2009 was organized by the Energy Action Coalition, a collaboration of 50 organizations, more than 700 local groups and hundreds of thousands of supporters. This year was the third occurrence of the annual event that sought to hold the country's elected officials accountable to climate and economic issues during the first 100 days of President Barack Obama's administration.

Highlights of Power Shift 2009 included addresses by Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and other key politicians, a career fair, training in lobbying and a rally at the Capitol Building. On Monday, some of Ohio University's participants met with members of Congress to discuss actions that could be taken on the issue of climate change.

Rebekah Clark, vice president of Ohio University's Sierra Coalition, was encouraged by a meeting she had with a staff adviser to Congressman Alan Mollohan, whom she said supports the creation of 5 million green jobs.

"Our elected officials recognize how many of us want a bold bill to be passed addressing climate change, but they do not hear from us enough. They were very receptive to our ideas and suggestions for the future of our country," Clark said. "They told us to go home and mobilize our communities and encourage letter writing, e-mail and phone calls to their offices. I learned that most of them will back us if enough voices ask."

Months before Power Shift 2009, Power Vote T-shirts were a common sight across the Ohio University campus. The Power Vote campaign, a national non-partisan effort also led by the Energy Action Coalition, garnered signatures from 341,127 young Americans nationwide. Signatories pledged to vote in support of "clean and just energy" in the 2008 presidential election.

By Election Day, 3,046 Ohio University students had pledged support for the Power Vote campaign -- the second most pledges of any college or university in the nation. Many of the Ohio University Power Vote organizers attended Power Shift, relishing a chance to rally around clean energy solutions in the company of fellow environmentalists.

In their words

Here's what student participants had to say about Power Shift 2009:

"I think Power Shift is important because it brings together many like-minded people to exchange ideas on ways to green our respective schools."

-- *Dillon Green, a senior double-majoring in history and education*

"I couldn't wait to meet thousands of other young people who care about the environment like I do."

-- *Natalie Fox, senior geography major*

"I am so passionate about this movement. (I had to miss an exam Monday), but after I explained how important this was to me, my professor helped me work something out."

-- *Cory Gagliardi, senior computer science major*

"I learned a lot more than I thought possible in a three-day weekend. The most inspiring thing I am taking away from Power Shift 2009 is that elected officials are just people working for us, and we have no need to fear dialogue with them on the issues we care about. The Congress and Senate want to hear what is important to their district. It's up to us to inform them."

-- *Rebekah Clark, senior geography and environmental studies major*

"Being around 12,000 youth, all very similar to myself, gave me the confidence that I needed to be an active part of this massive environmental movement. To have all the active organizations in one place with solid representatives showed how professionals are addressing climate change and other issues."

-- *Sarah Ward, senior applied ecology major*

Students aren't the only ones voicing concern on the issue of climate change at Ohio University.

In March 2007, President Roderick J. McDavis signed the American College and University Presidents' Climate Commitment, pledging to ultimately offset 100 percent of the university's greenhouse gas emissions. It's a goal that Sustainability Coordinator Sonia Marcus described as "very aggressive ... but one that is achievable if we choose to prioritize it."

After all, she reasoned, "It is certainly our responsibility to address our own impact on climate change."

Related Links

Power Shift 2009 (following this link will take you outside Ohio University's Web site): <http://www.powershift09.org>

Energy ActionCoalition (following this link will take you outside Ohio University's Web site): <http://energyactioncoalition.org>

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