

Protecting Children's Health

An Interview with Dominique Browning, Director and Co-Founder, Moms Clean Air Force

EDITORS' NOTE More than a dozen years ago, Dominique Browning convened a series of conversations with women who had expertise in climate policy, regulatory, and legal clean air issues, marketing, and business to discuss how to engage and mobilize people – and specifically mothers – to fight climate pollution. Moms Clean Air Force (moms-clean-air-force.org) was formed out of those conversations, with the mission of changing the focus of the national conversation about global warming from polar bears to people. Over the next decade, Moms Clean Air Force has grown to become a national organization of more than 1.5 million mothers, with several dozen state chapters, uniting to protect children's health and well-being by making sure clean air, toxic chemicals, and climate rules and laws are as strong as they can be. Prior to working at the Environmental Defense Fund, Browning spent decades in the magazine world where she worked as an editor at *Esquire*, *Texas Monthly*, and *House & Garden*. At the *Washington Post's* *Newsweek* in the 1980s, she broke the glass ceiling in becoming the first woman assistant managing editor of any of the U.S. news magazines. She is the author of several books and has contributed regularly to *Time.com* and *The New York Times*. She is the recipient of the Audubon Women in Conservation's prestigious Rachel Carson Award and was recently honored with an Advocates Award from Environmental Advocates of New York.



Dominique Browning

to learn how to do everything from answering phones, taking dictation, and booking appointments for the executive women and men to whom I reported, all the way to writing direct mail copy and learning to read budgets. I went on to *Esquire*, from there to *Texas Monthly* (what was considered flyover country by New York media) and then to *Newsweek*, shedding administrative tasks and taking on editing duties as I grew. I loved working with good writers – and I realized I also loved managing people, finding, hiring, and cultivating talent, building teams, working the system to showcase our work, getting my finger on the pulse, and thinking three to six months to a year out about what was going to matter. At *Newsweek*, I was promoted to become an assistant managing editor, the first female top-level editor at any of the three major news magazines, so that was a glass ceiling cracked. I went on to edit *Mirabella*, and then to resurrect *House & Garden* for Conde Nast. That magazine folded in 2007, as the economy was

tanking, design businesses took a huge financial hit, the internet was making inroads into print, and the magazine industry slipped into a free fall from which it has never recovered. I published a book about that period of my life, wrote book reviews and essays for *The New York Times*, and consulted for *The Wall Street Journal* on their weekend paper.

Then, in 2009, I took an assignment from the Environmental Defense Fund to write an internal newsletter about their work. That was when a lightbulb switched on. I had always kept up my interest in science and health. I'm a passionate gardener, too, and so I pay attention to weather and seasons and heat and rain trends. I became increasingly anxious about global warming. I'd been paying attention to this since my *Newsweek* days, and we followed the evolving science in our pages. At *House & Garden*, a wonderful writer named Zem Joachim published a monthly column about sustainability and great design, and Bill McKibben and Sue Halpern wrote a monthly column about how they incorporated sustainability into their daily lives and their home.

Will you discuss your career journey?

On the face of it, perhaps my career path looks unusual. After abandoning dreams of becoming a doctor and dropping out of a pre-med major (I'll come back to this), I got a job in the magazine business. Why? Not because I was a huge reader of magazines – I read one, *Ms. Magazine*, my feminist Bible – but because my sister happened to hear about a publishing course at Radcliffe, and I needed a direction. That course opened a fascinating world to me; I moved to New York City and started out at *American Photographer*, then moved to *Savvy Magazine*, the magazine for executive women – a new kind of creature who deserved her own manual. Those were both start-ups, and a great opportunity



EcoMadres' Luz Drada speaks at Representative Barragán's press conference to introduce the Resolution on Protecting Latina Maternal and Infant Health From Extreme Heat and Air Pollution, September 2024

While I was interviewing scientists, policy makers, and economists at EDF, I realized that no one was communicating with regular people, people like me, mothers who cared about their children's futures and wanted to understand what they could do to fight global warming (beyond putting clothes outside to dry), but felt locked out of the conversation, unfamiliar with the jargon and scientific terms, and confused about what actions they could take that would lead to meaningful change. That was the "Ah-ha!" moment that led me to found Moms Clean Air Force. In 2011, a tiny group of us – mothers who cared passionately about tackling the climate crisis – decided to try a new approach to the problem: harness the power of mothers to protect their children's health. Everything I learned in my magazine career, from communicating simply and clearly to editing copy and building a brand, to mobilizing around a mission and to forming, leading and running a team of creative individuals – all of that has served me so well in the building of Moms Clean Air Force.

What was your vision for creating Moms Clean Air Force and how do you define its mission?

The vision is simple: inform mothers about what is happening and invite them into Congressional offices to share their stories about how air and climate pollution were impacting their lives. Sounds simple? The first time I accompanied a group of mothers into a U.S. Senate building, they paused nervously at the threshold, and one of the women turned to me and asked, "Are you sure this is legal?"

Make no mistake: air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions are inextricably linked. So, we open doors into the Environmental Protection Agency to testify about cleaning up the air and their responsibility under a jewel in the crown of American laws, the Clean Air Act. We demand that polluters, and makers of toxic chemicals – for which we are the guinea pigs – be held accountable, and to stop harming us and our children, who are even more vulnerable than adults.

How has Moms Clean Air Force evolved over the past decade?

We have evolved over the past decade as we have taken our energy and strength into significant new areas of focus: toxic chemicals and the pollution from the petrochemical and plastics industries. Speaking of meaningful solutions: we all thought that recycling plastics was a good thing. It turns out that while glass and metals are wonderfully recyclable, plastics are so full of toxic chemicals – thousands of them – and that it is in fact dangerous to be burning them in incinerators, which is what's happening now. Lots of toxic pollution gets into our air, so a plastics crisis becomes an air crisis. That's a huge new area we are tackling. As we have grown, we have also intensified our work in states, especially our work stopping methane pollution from the fracking industry, the so-called natural gas industry – because as we harvest methane gas, we get toxic volatile organic compounds and other harmful ingredients.

Our work has evolved in a deeply personal way, for me. I now have a grandson, age eight,



On October 6, 2022, Moms Clean Air Force and advocates from environmental justice, public health, and environmental organizations gathered outside the White House as part of a nationwide day of action to call on President Biden to take immediate action to cut methane pollution from the oil and gas industry

whom I love whole-heartedly. I think about him daily, as we plan our work. I think about how the world will look when he is in his twenties, thirties, and forties, and when he himself might become a father. And my thoughts are often filled with horror at the mess we are facing. The world will become increasingly dangerous and unsettled as our weather systems intensify and our resources – our access to food and to clean water, for instance – are overwhelmed. But then my thoughts are also filled with hope, and with awe: awe at the engineering prowess and the scientific breakthroughs in clean energy, in clean transportation, and in safe chemicals; and hope that we will raise up the brave new political leaders who will usher in the necessary systemic changes needed to confront this new world. Of course, many of them will be the very moms we are training right now.

Will you provide an overview of Moms Clean Air Force's work?

We work on the health impacts, particularly on children, of air pollution, climate pollution, toxic chemicals, petrochemicals, and plastics. We work to create strong laws and regulations to protect us from the sources of these pollutants and toxins. We work at the federal, state, and community levels, and we work especially hard to raise the voices of community members directly impacted by the production of these pollutants. Our moms tell their stories: the mom in Houston whose child's asthma is aggravated by the diesel truck pollution from a depot right by her home; the mom in Pennsylvania who has to care for her child suffering from a childhood cancer, and worry about his exposure to toxic chemicals and air; the great grandmother in Arizona who can't leave the house without oven mitts because metal stair railings burn her hands during those unbearable and long heat waves; the mom in Montana who has to move her family away from flooding – our stories go on and on.

How critical are metrics to track the impact of Moms Clean Air Force's efforts?

Metrics are incredibly important. We monitor our press hits carefully – the more people we reach with our messages the better – and we work hard to keep our social media community engaged and growing. Some things are easier to measure – moms testified before the EPA over 260 times last year in support of strong clean air protections; our membership count is well over 1.5 million; our work yields thousands of media hits per year; and our social media channels have more than 500,000 unique followers with a reach of more than 10 million impressions – both statistics being much higher than the nonprofit industry average.

Some are less tangible, and they are among my favorites. I set out, in starting Moms, to change the conversation about global warming from polar bears to people. No one was talking about the impact of a warming planet on people's health, on children's health. Moms Clean Air Force has succeeded beyond my wildest dreams: now everyone is talking about children's health. Global warming isn't about something happening in a faraway place, or in a faraway future. We are feeling it every single day, on our skin, in our homes, in our towns and cities. So many more people get it now than did 10 years ago and people want something done. They understand this is a bigger problem than one person can handle on her own. We need massive transformations of our life systems. That's underway. Not as fast as I'd like it to go, but it is happening.

What are your priorities for Moms Clean Air Force as you look to the future?

For the future our priorities are the same: Protect our children's health. Show people the way to demand and drive change. Harness the power of love, the love we feel for our children, our families, our homes and our lands. We build on love – the most sustainable, renewable energy we have ever known. ●