

THE REST OF YOUR LIFE

Why I Serve in Mother Earth's Cavalry

When Dr. Lise Van Susteren learned she was one of the 50 trainees chosen by former vice president and Nobel Peace Prize winner Al Gore to present their version of his global warming slide show, "An Inconvenient Truth," to audiences around the world, she was overjoyed.

"My husband kept saying to me, 'Of course they'll pick you. You have all the criteria,'" said Dr. Van Susteren, a Bethesda, Md.-based forensic psychiatrist who applied online in the fall of 2006, just weeks before training was to begin for successful applicants.

She described the wait for the response from Mr. Gore's camp, the Climate Project (www.theclimateproject.org), as a "little kid looking out the window to see if Santa Claus is coming. I knew the material Gore had put together was first-rate, so the opportunity to have excellent material that was visually appealing was important."

Dr. Van Susteren is no stranger to politics. In 2006, she ran for a Democratic seat in the U.S. Senate representing Maryland but withdrew because of insufficient campaign funding. Her desire to seek public office was prompted not only by her concern about global warming, she said, but also when then-Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.), who also is a physician, blocked federally funded research on embryonic stem cells in 2005.

"I said to myself, 'the American people are going to think that doctors don't care about their suffering,'" said Dr. Van Susteren, who grew up in Appleton, Wis., as the daughter of a judge. "I said, 'This is insane. Why am I in my office anymore if I believe that as a psychiatrist I might be able to present things with a psychological mindedness that gives me an edge? Why

am I not out there?' I recognized that so often the people who have power are probably not the ones that should have it. I exhorted myself to do what I was wishing others would do."

Today, that undertaking involves educating people from all walks of life about global warming. The first meeting of the 50 trainees took place during a dinner meeting in the Nashville, Tenn., home of Al Gore, whose slide show on global warming became the basis for "An Inconvenient Truth," an Academy Award-winning documentary film. Mr. Gore "is brilliant. He has prescience about so many issues, global warming being the one that is foremost in our minds today," Dr. Van Susteren said. "He told us that, for the last 25 years since he first started talking about climate issues, he kept looking over his shoulder and asking, 'Where is my cavalry?' He looked at us and said, 'You are my cavalry.' We were thrilled. Later, we presented him with an antique bugle and identified it as having come from the first 50."

During the course of the weekend, Mr. Gore gave his slide show to the trainees "and we were absolutely riveted and determined to show it to as many people as possible. The facts are terrifying and the need to warn the public is urgent. People don't understand how close we are to disaster."

Energized, she returned home to work on her own, shorter version of the slide show. Her first public lecture was just 6 weeks away. Dr. Van Susteren's husband and close friends sat through her early runs of the presentation. Then she moved the data projector to the basement and practiced her show solo at least a half-dozen times. "I needed to find just the right phrases so that I'd have the right cadence and the right

words, because for many people words like 'greenhouse effect' are a new language," she said. "I made a rule that I would not have a slide up unless I knew three things that I was going to say about each."

Her first lecture was to a group of legislative aides in Washington in November 2006, and she's been presenting at a rapid-fire pace ever since, logging more than 75 presentations to civic, educational, and environmental groups in metropolitan D.C. and in Spain, South Africa, the Dutch West Indies, Puerto Rico, and Anchorage, Alaska, while managing a part-time psychiatry practice.

Dr. Van Susteren said her audiences have responded enthusiastically to the presentation. She credits their response to the credibility of the scientific data and to her experience as a psychiatrist "in recognizing the value of a simple message. People must have an emotional connection in order to change. Gore's slide show offers the science and the drama that assure that."

"You can't just scare people," she commented. "That's one method, but it doesn't sustain change. I've been very careful that everybody understands every concept during the slide show well before we go into the numbers. We start off defining fossil fuel, what greenhouse gases are, and why scientists are worried. I talk to them about carbon being the common element in fossil fuel and that when we burn things with carbon in them, we mix them with oxygen and that forms CO₂. That's the



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greenhouse gas that we're talking the most about."

Giving presentations on behalf of the Climate Project is an ongoing volunteer post, but Dr. Van Susteren, who is the sister of Fox News legal analyst Greta Van Susteren, has parlayed her expertise and connections into other opportunities aimed at the betterment of Mother Earth. She has accepted an invitation to join the board of the National Wildlife Federation and was appointed by Maryland Gov. Martin O'Malley to serve on the Maryland Climate Change Commission.

"As stewards of the planet, it really is our job to protect what we're given and ideally to present it in better shape for succeeding generations," she said. "We have a distorted view [of ourselves] as masters of the universe, when we should be thinking of how we can peacefully coexist with nature. I worked as a doctor in Africa. I've had people die in my arms. It isn't abstract for me to know that impoverished people are suffering and dying as a result of our greenhouse gas emissions. Many children today spend the entire day looking for water instead of going to school because of the terrible drought conditions. Increasingly, it's a humanitarian issue. It's also a social justice issue, and it's going to be a national security issue. We're 5% of the world population and we're putting up 25% of the greenhouse gases. What will people think of us?"

By Doug Brunk, San Diego Bureau

Practical Ways to Help in the Fight Against Global Warming

What can busy physicians do to lessen the impact of current greenhouse gas emissions on global warming?

"Vote," Dr. Lise Van Susteren advised. "The science is there. The rate-determining factor really is elected officials. The quicker they write the regulations, the faster we're going to have action on this. Vote for those politicians who are advocating for legislation that will do something about climate change. We are in a very tight budget as far as time is concerned because we are really in trouble."

She offered other practical tips:

► **Be green at the office.** Toss any existing incandescent lightbulbs and replace them with compact fluorescent ones. Install motion-sensitive light switches.

Ask your building manager to request that the local power company buy its energy from renewable energy sources. "Turn it off, turn it down" is the mantra, and that includes heating and air conditioning.

The same drill goes for home.

"If you are building or renovating, make sure you do it green," said Dr. Van Susteren, whose home is powered by energy purchased from a wind farm.

"There are energy-efficient windows and doors. You can ask your service provider about getting an energy audit. You will be told where you are losing energy so you can beef up insulation and reduce your losses through windows and doors."

She added that solar panels on roofs "are an excellent choice and they usually pay back very quickly."

► **Promote green talk.** "Everybody should be talking about global warming," she said. "It should be all we talk about. We should be talking about all the ways to reduce our carbon footprint."

She added that it's healthy to participate in green activities such as walking, riding a bike, carpooling, telecommuting, or taking mass transit.

"We need a fundamental change in

the way we look at how we get around," she said.

"If we are getting off fossil fuels, we'll have greener skies and a much healthier place to live. That's a credo that doctors have and should be talking to their patients about all the time," added Dr. Van Susteren.

► **Ditch the gas guzzler.** Make sure your next car is a hybrid. Better yet, if you can afford it, buy one now.

► **Purchase Energy Star appliances.** "They use two-thirds less energy than non-Energy Star appliances," she said. "If you have a refrigerator in the basement that you don't have to use, unplug it. Get rid of it. It's probably an old refrigerator. Refrigerators are huge energy sucks."

► **Be mindful of phantom energy loss.** Unplug appliances, cellular phone chargers, and other devices that use standby power when they're not in use.

Better yet, "put all that stuff on a power strip and turn that power strip off when it's not needed," she said.

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Everyone knows that physicians have busy unpredictable schedules in which the needs of the patients come first. But all that selflessness does not make you impervious to the need for love and companionship. Do you use Web sites to troll for a mate? Have you found romance in the workplace? Please send your stories of how you have found time for dating to d.brunk@elsevier.com.