

PROJECT GREEN CHALLENGE

**DAY 25 GREENER
ECO HERO**

ClimateCrew2020

Insta: _climatecrew

Email: angela.zhu2469@gmail.com

School: Jericho High School

Username: climatecrew2020



Máxima Acuña de Chaupe



"I never had the chance to go to school, I never had the chance to learn even a letter but I know how to resist, to fight and that's why I will never be defeated by the mining companies"

Máxima Acuña is a weaver and subsistence farmer from a remote village in the Northern Highlands of Peru. Learning from her mother and Peruvian tradition, she grew up learning to gather local plants to dye the fabric she weaved to make a living. In 1994, she and her husband bought several acres of land, where they built a small house made of grass and earth. Since then, they have relied on farming the land to harvest enough crops to survive.

In 2010, however, a mining company claimed it had purchased all their property from the government to expand their open pit mine, and that Acuña and her family had no rights to the land even though they resided and built their lives there for decades. The company, Newmont Mining Corporation, based in Colorado, US, is an extremely wealthy company that maintains the largest South American gold mine, the Yanacocha gold mine. Their rapidly growing presence threatened the mountains, rivers, and lakes that provided for and had given life to Acuña and her community for years, since it began draining the nearby lakes and dumping waste into the wetland. With the support and aid of the local police and private security guards, the corporation destroyed Acuña's home and crops, beat her and her daughter unconscious with batons, and even killed five other local farmers who were protesting against the mines. Since the police and local Peruvian government continued to serve the economic interests of the mining corporation, they refused to take their reports and Acuña was even fined and sentenced to prison for "illegal squatting" on her own land.

After three years of difficult legal battles and international backlash against the Newmont Mining Company and Peruvian government, these charges were eventually successfully appealed and overturned and Acuña's land was rightfully returned back to her. Yet, Acuña has not stopped fighting tirelessly for her community's rights to their clean water and land. She organizes rallies to peacefully protest against mining in Peru and continues to face off against the Newmont Mining Company in the Peruvian Supreme Court. For her outstanding and courageous work, Máxima Acuña, at age forty-seven, was awarded the 2016 Goldman Environmental Prize.

I was drawn to Máxima Acuña because of the momentous struggles and challenges she was able to overcome in her life and her fearlessness and unflinching perseverance against the abuses of her government and the Newmont Mining Corporation. She should have never had to go through those events in the first place, but after her peaceful lifestyle was disrupted and she was thrust into the current situation, she has still managed to maintain optimism throughout her entire fight for justice. She has raised so much international awareness about the evils of large mining corporations and her activism has led global organizations Amnesty International and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to intervene for her cause. Máxima Acuña is incredibly inspiring to me, and she has even been described by some journalists as a "badass grandma". I agree with them wholeheartedly!

The thing that resonated with me the most about her story was the horrible and inexcusable actions of the Newmont Mining Corporation and Acuña's admirable determination. It's easy for privileged people like me to say that a situation like this would have never happened in the developed world, yet the Newmont Mining Corporation itself is an American company! Large multinational corporations like this mining company only commit their worst atrocities in developing countries like Peru and the rest of Latin America because they are the most vulnerable due to centuries of economic exploitation and imperialism from the global North. Still, similar cases of corporate greed occur all over the world, constantly. But not all hope is lost: Máxima Acuña's inspiring bravery and accomplishments give us hope that, even small farmers and other individuals from remote locations of the world have the ability to stand up for themselves and their natural human rights against the abuses of greedy corporations and corrupt governments. And it's up to us, the ones who are lucky enough (for now) to not face the same threats to our livelihoods and homes, to rise up, hold cruel corporations accountable, and support these communities throughout our common mission for a clean, just world.

What I would write to her

Unfortunately, we were not able to locate her contact information or any other method to get in touch with her, likely because she doesn't speak English nor use social media. This is what I would write to her if I was ever given the chance:

Dear Ms. Maxima Acuña,

I'm an American high school student who recently learned about your work in environmental activism, and I am writing to you to just let you know that you've really influenced my perspective on the world. I can't imagine or understand the true extent of the hardship you've undergone due to the Peruvian government and the Newmont Mining Company these past few years, but your struggles have taught me a lot about the the reality of the our world -- that many companies don't care about human rights or the environment, and only serve to create as much short-term profit as possible. Yet, your bravery and perseverance have taught me that normal people like you and me can stand up for ourselves against these companies, and that we can succeed. You've inspired me to believe that I need fight for my rights and the rights of people around me. Thank you for all the positive good you've done and awareness you've raised in the world. I wish you the best of luck in your legal battles in the Peruvian Supreme Court.

Best, Lily Li

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