

# Democracy as a habit - in 10 minutes or less



**GPS alumnus Jarrod Russell '11, founder of VotePlus10, was awarded the 2020 Alumni Sustainability Award for his activism with climate change and social issues**

By Virginia Watson | GPS News

Jarrold Russell '11 believes sustainability is vital to growing and supporting communities - and since his time as a student at UC San Diego's School of Global Policy and Strategy (GPS), he has worked as an advocate for climate action and a more equitable democracy.

Because of his continued dedication to environmentalism and social activism, he was recognized by the UC San Diego Sustainability Program Office and Advisory Committee on Sustainability as this year's [2020 Sustainability Award](#) winner for alumni.

"Alumni are rooted in our campus. We value the connection made from the time they are attending their first class to accepting their diploma," said Lisa Kellogg, senior director of alumni engagement and volunteer management during the

award ceremony. “They are proof of our university’s success. They contribute in a variety of ways once they graduate that help strengthen our campus community for future generations.”

Russell graduated from UC San Diego with a B.A. in international studies in 2007 and a [master’s degree in international affairs \(MIA\)](#) in 2011. GPS News chatted with him via Zoom to get his thoughts on the award, the 2020 election and his newest venture, [VotePlus10](#).

### **Congratulations on your award! What did it mean to you to win?**

It’s been such a blur! The award meant a lot of things to me. I got both my undergraduate and master’s at UC San Diego. I have a strong love and affinity for campus and GPS. To be acknowledged by my peers was really meaningful.

### **You spoke at the [2020 Triton Leaders Conference](#) in February, where you posed the question, “What will climate action look like for you this year?” What’s our greatest barrier as citizens to performing climate action?**

At the conference, I was able to facilitate a conversation not just about denial around climate but also about how we actually feel, and how that feeling connects to our propensity to act. It’s more about inaction in the face of something so big. We’re seeing a lot of issues emerge that can feel intractable. We’re all having to reflect now on a number of things because of the pandemic, like racial injustice and the overall health of democracy.

### **Tell us about your new startup, [VotePlus10](#), and how it relates to climate action and democracy.**

I moved up to the Bay Area from San Diego last August, and I was looking very closely at the twin crises we’re seeing in the health of the environment and democracy. I’m super concerned about the climate, with which we need to make significant headway in the next 10 years. At the same time, I am constantly perplexed that the political system is continuing to fail to address it. This is an election year, so I thought let’s dive in to do what we can to get an administration in place that has a real Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Around that time I met my co-founder, and we agreed that if we don’t fix our democracy, then we’re not going to be able to address climate change like we should. My goal is to allow as many people as possible to take action with our tool, [VotePlus10](#). We’re

predominantly building a tool to build democracy.

The principal elements of VotePlus10 are about simple actions, specifically peer-to-peer organizing. Through VotePlus10, you can take actions on any given issue right now and get points for it. You can also encourage your friends among your affinity groups and networks to take action with you.

We spent a lot of time building this system. We recognize that the average person is really busy and can get overwhelmed very easily. I noticed I'd had pretty significant spikes of activism in between jobs. So we really thought through this: How much time do we really have to sustain advocacy? With VotePlus10, we make sure actions take only a few minutes, with the goal to take a few actions a week. If we can get people to do 10 actions a month, suddenly we have democracy as a habit and not something we do every four years during a national election cycle.

Anyone interested can join VotePlus10 using [this link](#). I would love for us to take actions together.

**You've been described as having an entrepreneurial spirit. How did GPS help guide you on your path to being an entrepreneur?**

My first business was a lawn mowing business when I was 12 or 13. I was always so busy working that I didn't get to dedicate myself fully to my studies, but once I started my master's program, I focused 100 percent on GPS. I didn't work during that time, so that was the first time I was able to sign up for everything on campus and dive headlong into all these campus organizations. Those organizations and the relationships I built instilled in me a confidence in my own capacity to lead. I became the president of [Net Impact](#), and I presented to [David Victor](#) and [Dean Peter Cowhey](#) about going to Cancun, Mexico, that year to observe the [UN Climate Change Conference](#), which has turned into an ongoing opportunity for GPS students.

I was awarded the Doming Liu Award for leadership in 2010, which was a beautiful acknowledgment from my peers, the faculty and staff. It gave me a lot of confidence to put myself out there. It taught me to be very genuine and authentic, and that it's OK to take a chance, to try to help in a way where you're doing as much good as possible. My experience at GPS gave me the spark and the confidence to say I'm smart enough and know how to build strong enough relationships that I can build new things. Thanks to GPS, I have the tools to think

about things intelligently.

## **How can relying on your GPS alumni network benefit people professionally and personally?**

My sense is that the beauty of those two very intense years we share together - whether we had overlap in the years we were at GPS or not - is that we are all given a common set of tools by which to navigate the world. Feedback from even a few people who share that history is invaluable. One example is Ross Bixler, a GPS alum I hired at a previous company. Ross and I have stayed really great friends, and since I began VotePlus10, he has been advising me on the gamification of the system as well as a subset of social justice actions around LGBTQIA+ advocacy and rights. Anybody who has that shared lens that is willing to give feedback is an invaluable part of the development process.

## **Anything else you'd care to download?**

One concept that I will leave you with that I've been mulling over in my mind in recent months with respect to racial justice, environmental justice, the pandemic, our economy, our democracy, etc., is the concept of regeneration. To me, regeneration is sustainability 2.0. I feel like the times we are in are calling for us to not return to normal or maintain a status quo but to recognize, take stock and squarely address our weaknesses, assumptions and beliefs as a society through regenerative policies and thinking. I believe it is a powerful lens to address injustices across racial, economic, social, generational, environmental and regional lines.

When applied to agricultural cultivation, a core tenet of regeneration is that supporting and promoting diversity in an ecosystem drives resilience, healthy soil and balanced interactions - ultimately increasing the benefits to all those involved in that ecosystem, including humans. I don't know if you've seen "Biggest Little Farm" yet, but I highly recommend it. I always look at that as a microcosm of what is possible for larger scales of our societies and ecosystems.

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