

Episode 74: Looking back on Trump's presidency

In this episode, we interview three students affiliated with various student advocacy organizations around the University of Minnesota. We talk to them about their lives and activism these past four years under the Trump administration. We also hear about what they want to see from President Biden, as they discuss the importance of their work for their futures.

Ava Kian and Yoko Vue

MEGAN PALMER: Welcome back, everyone. We here at the Daily hope you enjoyed your winter break and got some well deserved rest and time off. It's been a long couple of weeks. The state of politics in the United States was fraught with the anticipation of Inauguration Day and a dramatic change in leadership. Nevertheless, President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris were inaugurated yesterday to serve as the leaders of the United States. In today's episode, we reflect on the four years under Donald Trump's leadership and look at his impact on university students and activists. We also speak with students about their hopes for the next four years under Biden's administration.

INTRO MUSIC

AVA KIAN: Hey everyone, I'm Ava Kian.

YOKO VUE: I'm Yoko Vue, and you're listening to "In The Know," a podcast by the Minnesota Daily.

KIAN: Biden was sworn into office yesterday, making him the 46th president of the United States. With this change in leadership, it's the perfect time to look back on Donald Trump's policies, to see how his decisions impacted the lives of so many people. I spoke with Ellie Stimmel, the President of Students for Reproductive Freedom, to better understand what Trump's presidency meant for reproductive rights.

ELLIE STIMMEL: Students for Reproductive Freedom is kind of an organization under Planned Parenthood... so definitely ... Trump's administration has impacted our work a lot.



Last year, we were doing a lot of work with Title X trying to keep that funding, and they ended up slashing that funding for Planned Parenthood, so that also affects like all health care that people can receive like usually birth control. You can get it for free at Planned Parenthood, now they have a sliding scale. So, it really does impact, like who is receiving all these benefits that Planned Parenthood is able to give.

KIAN: In August of 2019, the Trump administration created a new rule prohibiting Title X clinics from referring patients for abortions. In response, Planned Parenthood withdrew from Title X, causing them to lose around \$60 million a year in federal funding. That loss of funding has made Planned Parenthood's services less accessible, as services like birth control are now on a sliding scale. But Trump's decision also affected the activities of Students For Reproductive Freedom. Ellie says that the group lost some of the funding for outreach events they previously would have received in the past years as a chapter of Planned Parenthood's student organizing branch.

STIMMEL: I do think that some of our goals have altered, and our timelines have been altered because of the administration.... It has definitely been a lot of like defensive work and like trying to maintain our funding.

Last year and the year before, we could have spent more time with these current initiatives we have, like the Plan B, STI testing, and menstrual drive and things like that. But, instead, we were focusing on more national campaigns like Title X.

KIAN: Ellie said this took away time from more important work the group could have been doing. Still, she says the future for reproductive rights is bright. She was on the Planned Parenthood National Committee to endorse Biden. She and other reproductive rights organizations were on a Zoom call with then presidential candidate to establish a connection and discuss goals.

STIMMEL: We wanted to make sure that it wasn't just an endorsement because, you know, we obviously aren't going to endorse Trump. We really want to make sure that he knew what our goals were, and we want to make sure that we had a seat at the table.

The panel was actually like pretty surprised at how genuine he was and how he seemed he seemed very receptive to our message, and it made me very optimistic, and I know there's obviously so many other things that him and his administration are thinking about right now, but I do think that relationship that we have built with him and that the national Planned Parenthood has built with him is going to be very important in the future. And I'm really hoping that our goals can come to fruition, and hopefully, we can get that Title X funding back.

KIAN: Trump's administration posed serious challenges for advancements in reproductive rights, but the road does not end with Biden as president, Ellie said.

STIMMEL: I do think that regardless of whether it's a Democratic or Republican president that we still need to continue to push for these initiatives, because reproductive health is often...put on the back burner, especially with everything happening right now.

KIAN: Trump's influence on reproductive rights impacts the more than 2 million patients Planned Parenthood serves. Trump moved to defund clinics that offer reproductive care, like abortions. But his influence extends beyond policy. His words and actions on the matter stuck with Ellie throughout his presidency.

STIMMEL: I think the way that Trump has acted and the way that he's spoken really made a lot of survivors feel like they had no voice, and that's obviously not true, and especially after the #MeToo Movement that was shown ... I think it's harmful.

I think like as a survivor myself that was like a very harmful to me and just ... the ability of this man who is fear-mongering, who was bigoted ... of him to lead the free world. And for him to be able to say all these things without consequence is such a slap in the face to women, especially when survivors often are telling stories, and we're labeled as liars, when he is the biggest liar of all, it's just — it really is a slap in the face.

VUE: For Nadia Aruri, Trump's painful words and attacks have also stuck with her. Nadia is currently a board member of the Students for Justice in Palestine, or SJP.

NADIA ARURI: He really aggressively attacked people — congresswomen like Rashida Tlaib and Ocasio-Cortez and Ilhan Omar. And made a lot of accusations of antisemitism and, in particular, that is really damaging to our group, to organizers, especially for people like me and other young women of color in the group to kind of see, you know, this visual of this powerful figure attacking people who speak out and it's scary for a lot of people when you see that.

VUE: She clearly remembers waking up and asking Siri who won the presidential election.

NAT SOUND — SIRI AUDIO: “Donald Trump won the 2016 United States presidential election.”

ARURI: And my heart just dropped. I started crying and then I realized like my mom walked in, she was, she just like looked at me and I just looked at her and she was like, you don't have to go to school today if you don't want to.

I remember I went into school the next day, and just like hearing the kids talk about it just like made me sick to my stomach.

VUE: The Muslim ban in 2017 was a decision that hit close to home.

ARURI: My family is from Lebanon and from Palestine, and those aren't two—those are not countries that were on the ban, but as a whole, I think that decision really made almost every Muslim person in the U.S. feel scared.

VUE: She also recalls the move of the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Trump officially recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in December of 2017. There were protests against the move of the embassy and SJP endorsed a protest against the capital move in Saint Paul that was hosted by Women Against Military Madness and Anti-War Committee.

ARURI: What moving the embassy is pretty much doing, it was kind of like a power move to recognize that Jerusalem is the capital of Israel.

NAT — NEWSREEL — TRUMP: “Therefore I have determined that it is time to officially recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.”

ARURI: Which is obviously harmful to Palestinians because not only does it deny all existence of our country and of our land and of the people there that have lived there for so long...but, you know, it was obviously going to have a huge reaction.

VUE: The U.S. embassy officially opened in Jerusalem on May 14, 2018. This year coincided with the 70 year anniversary of Israel's independence as well as the 1948 Palestinian exodus, or Nakba.

ARURI: Which is basically the Arabs that in 1948 were evicted from their homes and became refugees.

VUE: The New York Times reported that 58 Palestinian demonstrators were killed and more than 2,700 were injured during protests on the day the embassy opened. There were also protests here in the United States and Nadia took part in Boston, where her family lives.

ARURI: I didn't really understand the significance of it at first. And I think a lot of people thought about this decision in terms of what it means for politics and what it means on an international and diplomatic level. But for me, all I really cared about was, is my family going to be okay, watching the news. It was one of the most heart-wrenching times in my life that I can remember that it felt traumatic to be Palestinian living through that.

To turn on the news and, you know, see people arguing about your family's right to exist. To see the images of, you know, 50, just the numbers backing out ten dead, 20 dead, 30 dead, 40 dead, and I remember just texting with my sister during that, and I was just said like I'm so depressed and then she just said we all are because that's really what was happening during that.

And in particular it hurts, right, cause it hurts as someone who, you know, never lived in Palestine, who wasn't born there, to see the country that I was supposed to call my own, the United States, being the cause of all this pain.

VUE: SJP hosted an event last month looking at the relationship between Biden and Israel that showed an unfavorable record with Palestine, Nadia said.

ARURI: I mean, still going to be bombs dropped on the middle East, still gonna send billions of dollars in military aid to Israel, no matter who the president is, whether it was Biden or Clinton or Trump. So, you know, looking forward, we can just hope that a different environment is created, um, in regards to, you know, student activists and things like that.

KIAN: As Nadia mentioned, student activists want the Biden administration to foster an environment that encourages activism. And that same message strikes true for Lotus Roodi, an environmental activist and member of Compassionate Action for Animals, who recalls the chilling feeling when Trump was elected in 2016.

LOTUS ROODI: Way back in 2016 when I was still in high school ... and he was elected ... I still remember the day very, very clearly ... I just remember my first worry was for the environment and for the planet. I was just really worried like "What's going to happen in these next four years with the planet? What's going to take place? What's going to change?" And then of course, all the fears for all the other stuff set in, but that was like this immediate thing that my mind jumped to.

KIAN: Looking back, Lotus says they were expecting much worse.

ROODI: It has not been good by any stretch of the imagination, but it's better, like we haven't had a climate apocalypse yet, which is better than what I was anticipating.

KIAN: While there was no climate apocalypse per se, Trump's rhetoric about climate change and his policies have certainly harmed the environment. A couple things come to Lotus's mind when thinking about Trump's negative impact on the environment.

ROODI: 100 pieces of legislation, if I'm remembering correctly, have been either tampered with or have been changed to be... more relaxed, or they have been eliminated entirely. One of those was the Endangered Species Act... Which is very concerning because... 1 million species around the world are currently endangered or vulnerable... And the funds for this program that were meant to protect the species to... monitor their population to... reintroduce them back into the environment to try to preserve some of that diversity. Those funds have now been gutted. And there is not nearly as much funding as it was before.

KIAN: While these policies and decisions were being made far away from Lotus in Minneapolis, they could see the Earth changing from their very own window.

ROODI: The Brown Christmas... I think we've had one or two of those in the past four years and ... I'm starting to think, winter is not going to be winter anymore. We're not going to have a Minnesota winter anymore. And as miserable as Minnesota winters are, that's the way Minnesota is supposed to be. And if we don't have a really, really cold Minnesota winter, what does that mean? This isn't normal. ... This isn't some faraway thing. This is something that's happening right here, right now.

KIAN: Though Lotus cared about keeping up with environmental policy, watching the Trump administration relax regulations was disheartening, and sometimes they had to turn off the news.

ROODI: It was almost like Trump was some sort of political cheese grater. And he was just eroding at the ... he was eroding at the protections that the environment has and giving more leverage to the corporate world to do whatever it seeks to do, to make more money to get more capital, to get more profit at the expense of the environment.

And that's not really that easy to watch ... There was a long period where I just didn't pay attention to that because there's not really a whole lot I could do about it ... So, I was just kind of sitting there getting upset. Which isn't a good place to be ever, so I just turned off the news and stopped watching, but it was very painful to see that.

KIAN: The road forward is clear to Lotus. Facing the aftermath of Trump's presidency, they feel the nation has learned its lesson and needs to change its priorities.

ROODI: I think now, this is kind of a time where we've said, okay we've hit our limit... we're going to have runaway climate change, and we're going to have a bunch of things that we cannot walk away from if we don't change this, we need to change our attitude, and I think a lot of young people have taken that into account.

KIAN: And for what's to come with Biden in office, this student wants people to remember that we are still in a climate emergency and to keep up the urgency.

ROODI: What I'm afraid of is that Biden gets nominated, and let's say in this scenario the kind of the Trump following kind of dies a slow death and it kind of fades into obscurity... what I'm afraid of is that people will become complacent again.

And that we'll kind of forget that these things are emergencies and I think that's-that's the fear of a lot of people I know... I'm afraid of that for the environmentalist movement. I'm afraid that if we're not seeing headlines saying, "this has been rolled back. This has been rolled back. This has been rolled back." We're going to think everything is fine. And the fact is... even with Biden in power and even if everything is blue across the board. We are still in a climate emergency, and we are still in an environmental emergency. Habitat loss is still a huge problem. Pollution is still a huge problem. And these things are not going away because of a shift in power. We need to actively be moving through this. We can't forget about it after Trump leaves.

We need to have things that are permanent and that have long-lasting change.

KIAN: From speaking to Ellie, Nadia and Lotus, we've learned a lot about how students with different passions experienced the past four years under Trump's administration. We got an inside look into their challenges as activists, individuals, and their hopes for this nation in the next four years.

VUE: Most importantly, all three students expressed that Biden's new role as the president does not guarantee progress but instead pushes activists even further to continue their work.

FADE UP & UNDER OUTRO MUSIC

PALMER: In other U news: over winter break, Dinkytown Wine & Spirits closed its doors after 30 years; 12 regent candidates were recommended to the State Legislature for the upcoming regent elections; and the Minnesota Student Association has introduced a new bill tracker to monitor how state legislation affects students. We'll see you next week.