

Testimony of Mike Richter
Senate Democrats' Special Committee on the Climate Crisis
September 12, 2019

Good morning Senator Schatz and fellow committee members. I want to thank you for having me here today and to acknowledge your efforts in tackling the climate crisis.

My name is Mike Richter. I am a retired professional athlete, a 3 time Olympian, a father of three boys, and, for the last decade, an owner of a company focused on upgrading energy efficiency in commercial buildings.

You may ask, what does someone who has spent most of his life stopping hockey pucks have to offer in regards to the environment? In a word, potential.

In high school I read a quote by Aristotle that resonated with me:
“Good in any organism is using that with which he has been endowed to its fullest potential.”

This is what sports is about; this is what college helps us discover; this is really what we strive to fulfill every day in our personal and professional lives. And this was the inspiration for my company, Brightcore: making buildings perform to their maximum capability.

However, here is a more fundamental connection between the environment and potential: our health. Someone once described me as a “surprising environmentalist” as a professional athlete. First, I would say that anyone who is alive has an interest in the quality of the water we drink and the air we breathe. Nike founder Phil Knight famously said, “If you have a body, you are an athlete.” I agree. I would add that if you have a body, you are an environmentalist.

But especially as an athlete, I came to appreciate the connection between the environment and health: my health and level of performance. What I eat, drink, how I sleep; these all profoundly affect my health, and we all understand how health affects performance—the ability to reach your potential.

Climate change is the singular environmental issue that is negatively affecting the health of the planet daily, and thereby every organism that relies on the planet for its own health. Humans are no exception. From reduced quality of the air we breathe to the fouling of the water we drink, our health is diminished, and our ability as an individual, a country, and a species to realize our potential along with it.

The roots of hockey are in the frozen lakes, ponds, and rivers of North America. Here, the game is at its best and young players limited only by their imagination develop their true genius for the sport.

I grew up in a northwestern suburb of Philadelphia, dreaming of one day playing in the NHL. Ice time of any sort was hard to come by, so when the ponds froze my world stopped. I can remember practicing kick saves all alone for as long as there was daylight.

As enjoyable as the simple act of skating is—its efficiency, rhythm, and speed—to skate outside is altogether different. It is pure magic.

Natural ice is also the perfect metaphor: while it is truly a loss when these roots are severed in the shifting terrain of climate change, our disappearing winters serve as the canary in the coal mine for the health of our planet—and our potential.

As a player, I represented the most powerful nation on earth in three Olympic Games and it was an unforgettable honor. However, our recent lack of leadership—in fact, our dubious title as laggard while being the largest GHG emitter per capita—is both embarrassing and dangerous. The danger lies not just in losing the title of “most powerful nation” or our leadership status. The threat is in actual geopolitical disruption and conflict. Our unwillingness to be the leader we have always been on the world stage does not make the problem go away; it only amplifies our vulnerability and erodes our capacity for further accomplishment.

As a father, I see two unfortunate lessons being taught to the next generation that will only diminish our greatness.

The first is that social injustice is tolerable. These burdens that we not just allow, but create every day, of inaction on climate change fall disproportionately on the poor, women, and the young. No parent can look their child in the eye and explain this away—it is unfair.

The second lesson is how we as a nation react to problems. America has always been accepting of the challenges presented. My father fought in World War II, both parents lived through the Depression, yet when confronted with our reality today, our response has been: it is not happening; it is too expensive; it is too difficult. Such cowardice undermines every noble value upon which our country was founded. We can and must do better.

Finally, as an entrepreneur, I see missed opportunities. Existential problems have a way of demanding all of your resources be brought to bear on the solution. The cost of inaction is far more than the price of a solution; and further, the technological solves for much of this issue are already proven, off-the-shelf options. What is outlined in the 100% Clean Economy Bill has the

promise to create massive wealth—we could be the world leaders in clean energy innovation. To the victors go the spoils. And the spoils of tackling the climate crisis aren't simply clean air, clean water, and safe, livable communities, but also the opportunity to create millions of jobs.

Today, where I live in Southern Connecticut, we probably see less natural ice than Philadelphia did two decades ago. When I see a pond melt, I know the lost opportunity for this generation to experience the joy of this wonderful game. What we all need to understand is that this represents something far more ominous. The world is different, the climate is warming, and these changes are negatively affecting every aspect of our life: health, national security, social justice, and the economy.

We are at a tipping point, and America will lead the way for better or worse. Passing the 100% Clean Economy Bill is the first step in allowing individuals, our nation, and the entire world to return to health and realize their highest capabilities. As Aristotle would say, there is “good in this pursuit.”