Valerie Percy is a speech pathologist in an elementary school in Kingston, New York and a community leader in Cornell University’s Climate Stewards (CCS) program.

Her motivation to join the program began with a desire to combat feelings of powerlessness amidst a changing climate. She has now channeled her concern into tangible projects that help advance Kingston’s Climate Plan while instilling knowledge in younger generations.

For her Climate Steward Project, Valerie originally hoped to establish teaching gardens at Kingston schools. However, when initial funding plans fell through, she refocused her efforts on salvaging existing gardens into pollinator pathways. She also supports an action-based sustainability program that is easy for teachers to access and use. These initiatives seek to inspire students’ interest in stewardship and create opportunities for hands-on involvement.

Shifts in seasons and loss of biodiversity are two climate-induced issues that Valerie has noticed in her community. Her hexagonal garden filled with wildflowers and native plants is primed to address these concerns as it provides crucial habitat for local pollinators.

The gardening project also introduces these biodiversity and seasonality problems to the schoolchildren, teaching the kids how to be part of the solution. Through this project, the kids not only get to dig in the dirt while learning about plants and pollinators, but also raise money for it by selling wildflower seeds. Older kids have even written to legislators to support the pollinator project. For example, students petitioned...
for a ban on neonicotinoids, a class of insecticides that harms pollinators and other insects.

One of the project's major milestones was Field Day at the elementary school, in which students pulled weeds and planted seeds. By summertime, just a couple of months later, the plot had transformed into a flourishing garden.

in addition to the garden restoration, Valerie has also supported her school's "Earth Month" program. During "Earth Month", classrooms compete with one another to complete "small but mighty" environmental initiatives. This year's theme was water-based, the month dubbed "Our Blue Planet". For her part, Valerie furthered an initiative to reduce the school's single-use plastics, the notorious polluters of waterways and oceans. Working alongside administrators, Valerie helped the school reintroduce reusable spoons, tumblers, and bowls into the cafeteria system. In just a few weeks' time, the initiative cut the cafeteria's garbage output in half.

Climate stewardship has enabled Valerie to utilize her existing assets as a speech pathologist - such as familiarity with children and connections to the school - while applying information she learned in the CCS program. Climate change can be a scary topic for kids, so Valerie uses her communication expertise to make lessons approachable and lighthearted yet meaningful and impactful.

One of the main goals of the CCS program is to empower participants to independently head climate action projects so they can teach those in their community about climate change, and Valerie feels her steward status has indeed bestowed such ability and confidence. A key concept she drives home is that no matter how slow, all progress is important; it is essential to continue moving forward, and results from even the smallest actions accumulate over time. She believes these pollinator garden and Earth Month projects are just the start, and each one is a step in the right direction for the community of Kingston, NY.