



From the Desk of Leonard Garfield,  
MOHAI Executive Director

## Celebrating Earth Day's 50th Anniversary

I often reflect that much of American history has been made by young people. People in their 20s and 30s (even teens) who are able to see the world in new ways, take risks that others won't, forging connections that might seem improbable to their elders. Certainly that was the case 50 years ago when a young man organized the first-ever Earth Day, a nationwide mobilization of students, activists, and average citizens calling attention to our endangered environment. The young man who transformed a good idea into a milestone moment for the world was Denis Hayes, a native Washingtonian whose story is featured in MOHAI's [\*\*True Northwest: The Seattle Journey\*\*](#) and [\*\*Bezos Center for Innovation\*\*](#) exhibits.

In interviews with MOHAI and others, Denis has spoken of how he came to that moment after years of study, travel and reflection, when he realized the interconnectedness of the natural environment and human communities. As national Earth Day coordinator in 1970, he took that awareness into the realm of action, masterminding complex logistical and strategic problem-solving with the energy and persistence that defines innovators. The stunning success of the first Earth Day—reputedly a tenth of the nation's population participated in some way, including thousands of students on hundreds of college campuses—launched a broad-based political movement that helped spur passage of the [\*\*Clean Air Act\*\*](#), the [\*\*Clean Water Act\*\*](#) and the [\*\*Endangered Species Act\*\*](#), the enduring framework of the nation's environmental law.

From those early days, a long line of Seattle activists and leaders has helped propel the movement, from Bill Ruckelshaus, appointed by the President Richard Nixon to serve as first director of the federal [\*\*Environmental Protection Agency\*\*](#) (yet another outgrowth of Earth Day momentum) to Jason McLarren, who founded the [\*\*Living Building Challenge\*\*](#) a few years ago. As Executive Director of Seattle's [\*\*Bullitt Foundation\*\*](#), Denis Hayes himself continues to be an environmental advocate of international stature. And Seattle Mayor Jenny Durkin and Washington Governor Jay Inslee are among the nation's political leaders most associated with climate action.

But on this 50th anniversary of Earth Day, it is also instructive to look at today's emerging leaders—activists like Derek Hoshiko, who presented [\*\*MOHAI's Denny Lecture\*\*](#) this month, as well as the many young climate activists of our region whose advocacy is distinguished by their passion and persistence. Like Denis Hayes before them, they are forging pathways the rest of us will follow. Young people leading the way—it is how history gets made.