

# 'An opportunity to thrive'

## Bethel alum co-founds an online ethical shopping platform inspired by her faith and her work in politics.

By Makenzi Johnson | Design by Hannah Hobus

Deven Nelson had never been afraid of a presidential election before. As a white Christian, she'd never worried how the next person in office would impact her life. She had never been afraid – until the 2016 election.

When Donald Trump took office and began his role as president in 2016, Nelson realized some of the policies and laws he was promising to change would alter her personal life.

"Trump talked about how he wanted to change the immigration laws and ideas so that people couldn't bring their additional family members [to the U.S.]," Nelson said. "We were really scared."

Nelson is married to Simon Chunkath, an Indian immigrant who was not a citizen of the U.S. yet. He

was in the country for university and work, but didn't have his green card as he believed his stay would only be temporary. His mother was back home in India, and if Trump changed the immigration laws, it would mean she couldn't stay with him in the U.S.

"Politics were never personal to me and I never thought I would be personally impacted," Nelson said. "I felt powerless."

A new door opened up when her husband's employer, Medtronic, wanted to send him to Singapore.

"You can bring your parents [to Singapore with you], but you can't in the U.S." Nelson said.

Using the little power they thought they still had, the couple moved to Singapore to be closer to Chunkath's mother. It was only then that Nelson took the time to think about what she truly values.

And from there People Heart Planet, an online shopping platform, was born from Nelson and co-founder Maithreyi Ramdas' individual consumer needs as people who care

about the planet and want to do good.

Nelson graduated from Bethel University in 2001 with a bachelor's degree in political science and social work.

"Politics, I think, at its best, is bringing people together to solve challenges that society faces," Nelson said. "I loved the thought of politics at its best and I was so passionate and excited about that."

After graduating, Nelson started working in politics right away. She's worked for congressmen on political campaigns, issue campaigns, non-profit consulting and more. Nelson later worked for a St. Paul consulting firm, Grassroots Advocacy Solutions, that worked with national nonprofits. She was assigned to work on a campaign called Power Shift in 2009, which sends college students to a climate change conference to train them to be advocates.

"While there, I stupidly told someone I was working with that 'Oh you know, the environment isn't really my

People Heart Planet only includes ethical brands that meet their criteria: fair trade, sustainable, organic and vegan.

FAIR TRADE		to be considered a company must at least pay employees and suppliers a fair wage, safe working conditions and never employ child or slave labor
SUSTAINABLE		fashion brands should recognize that every part of their business impacts the environment, examining the entire lifecycle of a product from design to final sale, no set criteria for defining sustainability
ORGANIC		refers to the process of manufacturing and producing products without the use of pesticides, synthetic fertilizers, genetic modification, antibiotics, growth hormones, etc.
VEGAN		products abstain from using any animal parts or byproducts in their materials and production, truly cruelty free, never use leather, wool, silk or cashmere or any type of hyde, skin or bone, ethical veganisms, environmental veganism, dietary veganism



Co-founder of People Heart Planet, Deven Nelson, said that it is because of husband Simon Chunkath's encouragement that she turned her Excel spreadsheet with hundreds of sustainable clothing companies into an online platform for other people to access. The online platform officially launched in late 2021. | Photo Submitted by Deven Nelson



Bethel alum and co-founder of People Heart Planet Deven Nelson said that PHP was not specifically created on Christian values, but her individual faith impacted why she is passionate about ethical consumption. "It is because of scripture [that] participating in the world in a way that does not oppress or exploit people makes sense to me." Nelson's faith, political background and world experiences all played a role in creating PHP. | Photo Submitted by Deven Nelson

issue. I care a lot more about poverty issues and human suffering," Nelson said. "What an ignorant thing to say."

The woman Nelson was having this conversation with was gracious in explaining to Nelson that climate change does have a human factor to it.

"[She told me] how [climate change] impacts people of color and some of the poorest places in the world and how it would hit them first," Nelson said.

After moving to Singapore in 2016, Nelson realized climate change isn't just an environmental issue. To her, it's about human justice.

Nelson was already learning to shop differently in Singapore. Her options were limited. She started to evaluate the question of how she was consuming products and

realized the way she was consuming was inconsistent with her values as a Christian.

"We believe that every person should be treated with dignity and respect like they are a creation of God," Nelson said. "We should give [people] an opportunity to thrive, yet the economic system that we participate in is doing the exact opposite ... it's exploiting and causing physical harm to women and children. It's putting people at risk."

That system was not something Nelson wanted to participate in.

"I looked at my husband and said, 'OK, we're going all in, 100% ethical consumer all of the time,' which for me was more of a fair trade issue than sustainability," Nelson said.

In 2017, she sat down and created an Excel spreadsheet with the names of various ethical companies and

stores that she and her family could shop at. Her husband told her, "You need to turn this into a platform, not just an Excel spreadsheet."

So she made a website and found a business partner.

People Heart Planet is an online platform that acts as a resource guide for people wanting to shop ethically and sustainably. Roughly 150 brands are available for purchase through PHP, all of which have been selected and approved by Nelson and Ramdas.

"We are just a tool. The idea is to give people as much information as you can about what's available and where to buy it," Nelson said.

The co-founders judge various brands by four forms of criteria. They have to, at minimum, be either sustainable, fair trade, vegan or organic, but many are a combination of these

aspects.

"Since we personally vet all the brands ourselves to ensure they meet our criteria... people can shop with peace of mind," Ramdas said. "Whether you care about human rights, animal welfare or environmental sustainability, we have something for everybody."

Nelson and Ramdas met while living in Singapore and realized they had a shared passion for wanting to fight against climate change. Ramdas' vegetarian lifestyle and affinity for the environment plus Nelson's passion for human rights created an opportunity to build a platform to help not only themselves, but others.

"This business is the intersection of everything that I care about," Ramdas said. "If we want to change the world for the better, we need to show people how."

Nelson recognizes that no one single person will ultimately stop climate change, but they can help "challenge the status quo" of buying into a system — a system that only furthers the damage to the environment and humans.

"There are women working in Bangladesh who are making less than \$1 a day," Nelson said. "\$1 a day is not a living wage over there."

An accessible, ethical online shopping platform gives people the chance to make a decision whether or not they are going to support an industry that exploits the planet's resources, humans, plants and animals alike.

While PHP itself was not specifically founded on Christian values, Nelson's own faith impacts her passion and decision for ethical consumption.

"For me, the Bible tells a story about God who is a liberator and one who makes a way for overcoming oppression and breaking free from bondage," Nelson said. "Participating in the world in a way that does not oppress or exploit people makes sense to me."

Through scripture she is able to see why love is important not only for the people, but for the planet.

"God does not see the planet as some inanimate [object] — kick it around, who cares. No way," Nelson said. "The spirit of God is dwelling in it. If we as humans can't get it right, the planet will cry out and praise God. This love is so much more amazing than I ever realized." **C**