

and across the states, thanks to his vocal opposition to President Donald Trump, his adherence to a progressive stance and his worldview.

In fact, though Merkley never saw himself in politics, he's always held the big-picture idea of making the world better.

"The philosophy I grew up with — and it was embedded certainly through my church, through Boy Scouts, through my parents — was to take your life on this planet and make the world a better place," Merkley says. "And so that does mean confronting injustice, and unfortunately there is a lot of injustice to confront."

OREGON-BASED INSPIRATION FOR ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Merkley has been concerned with tackling broad issues while serving as a politician — health care, civil rights, foreign policy and his small town origins have inspired a lot of his work. One issue we discussed at length was economic injustice and restoring the American Dream in the face of the current administration.

Both his mother and father grew up poor, Merkley says, yet they were able to afford a house on a single income.

"My parents' generation saw, from 1945-1975, this incredible improvement of the position of working families," he says. "It was a steady curve of productivity. The entire wealth of the country grew, but workers got a fair share of that growth. From 1975 till now, we have not gotten a share of that wealth — that wealth has been flat or declining."

That idea of being able to build wealth from nothing is scarcely achievable anymore, Merkley says.

"What we have seen over the decades is just an absolute oppression of the middle class, squeezing them for the benefit of the wealthy, and we see that in this administration more than anything we've seen before," he says.

"For example, last year, in 2017, a main mission was to do a tax bill — it's a tax scam — that borrowed a trillion and a half dollars and gave it almost all to the wealthiest Americans," Merkley says. "It's the most unbelievable bank heist of the national treasure. This is something that happens in corrupt nations where there's a government

colluding with the wealthy and well-connected."

Merkley says he's working to strengthen the middle class by crafting legislation regarding job growth and affordable housing, among other things.

"That's a big battle, but I'm continuously immersed in it," he says.

BETWEEN THE WORLD AND MERKLEY

As a U.S. senator from Oregon, along with tackling local and national issues, Merkley adheres to that idea of making the world better, and he's worked globally as well — all while making sure to tie his international trips back to the U.S., and specifically to what the Trump administration can be doing to help and what it hasn't been doing.

That global mindset came naturally. Before his career in politics, he traveled to Ghana as a high school exchange student and later worked in villages in Mexico and India.

Last year, Merkley took a trip to Myanmar on a fact-finding mission for an update on the Rohingya genocide.

"I organized a congressional delegation to go in November of last year to find out what had gone on," Merkley says. "We did see some things in Myanmar that were powerful, like seeing a Muslim quarter, which was a section of the city which the residents were not allowed to leave, and there were police stations at the end of the streets, and it gives you shivers down your spine. It's like an early-stage Warsaw ghetto."

Merkley also visited some intensely crowded Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh, something he says the U.S. needs to be paying more attention to and shining a light on.

"So what are these refugees to do? The U.S. president has not said one word," Merkley says. "So the anniversary is coming up, one year on Aug. 25, of the start of the ethnic cleansing or genocide. It would be a perfect time for the State Department to release these reports. So I'm calling on the State Department to release this report and for the president, our president, President Trump, to take this as an occasion to speak to the world about the importance of holding Myanmar accountable."

A few months ago, in May, Merkley visited Puerto Rico to check on recovery efforts after Hurricane Maria. Though it's a U.S. territory, he says, the Trump administration has not treated Puerto Rico as its own.

"It's abysmal," Merkley says. "This administration has really done a terrible job at helping families recover."

"This is like the pace of recovery you would expect in a third world country, not the United States of America," he says. "It made me feel like people who live in U.S. territories who are U.S. citizens should have voting representation in the Senate in some form, because I can't imagine if they had somebody who could represent them and had the clout of having a vote, that they would've been ignored or neglected like that."

He adds: "If there were other things that I knew about that were going on that I could shine a light on, I'd travel there and do it. So, stay tuned."

MAKE (BIPARTISAN) AMERICA HEALTHY AGAIN

A resident of Portland, Merkley is very invested in issues here in Oregon, regardless of the amount of recent national attention he's gotten and speculations as to a presidential run.

Though he can be counted as a progressive, as far as the U.S. Senate goes — he was the only senator to endorse Bernie Sanders in the presidential primaries — he spends a lot of his time talking to conservatives when he's in the Beaver State.

Each year, Merkley visits every county in Oregon for a town hall meeting with its residents. "We have 36 counties in Oregon. Many of them, the majority, are actually quite red."

"It's possible to build bridges," Merkley says of the political tug-of-war between Republicans and Democrats.

"I'm constantly reaching out to my Republican colleagues to say, 'Hey, will you join me in this?' It's possible on more modest pieces of legislation," he says. "On the things that have become deeply polarized through the difference of the split in the national media, it gets much harder. Much, much harder."

One hot-button issue he discusses with his conservative constituents in Oregon is health care. And he's even

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