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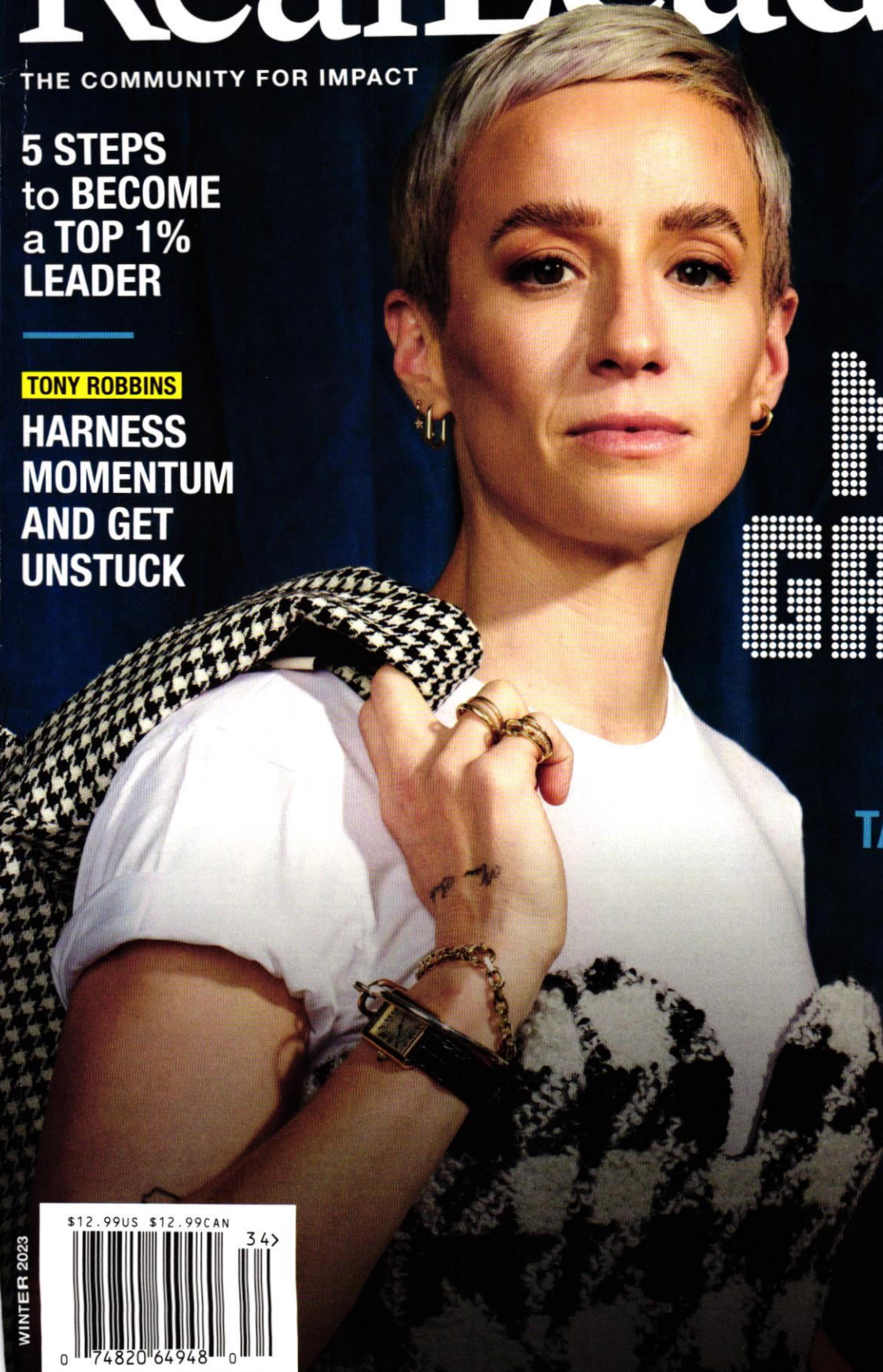
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**RAPINOE**  
**TAKES THE FIELD**  
**FOR EQUALITY**



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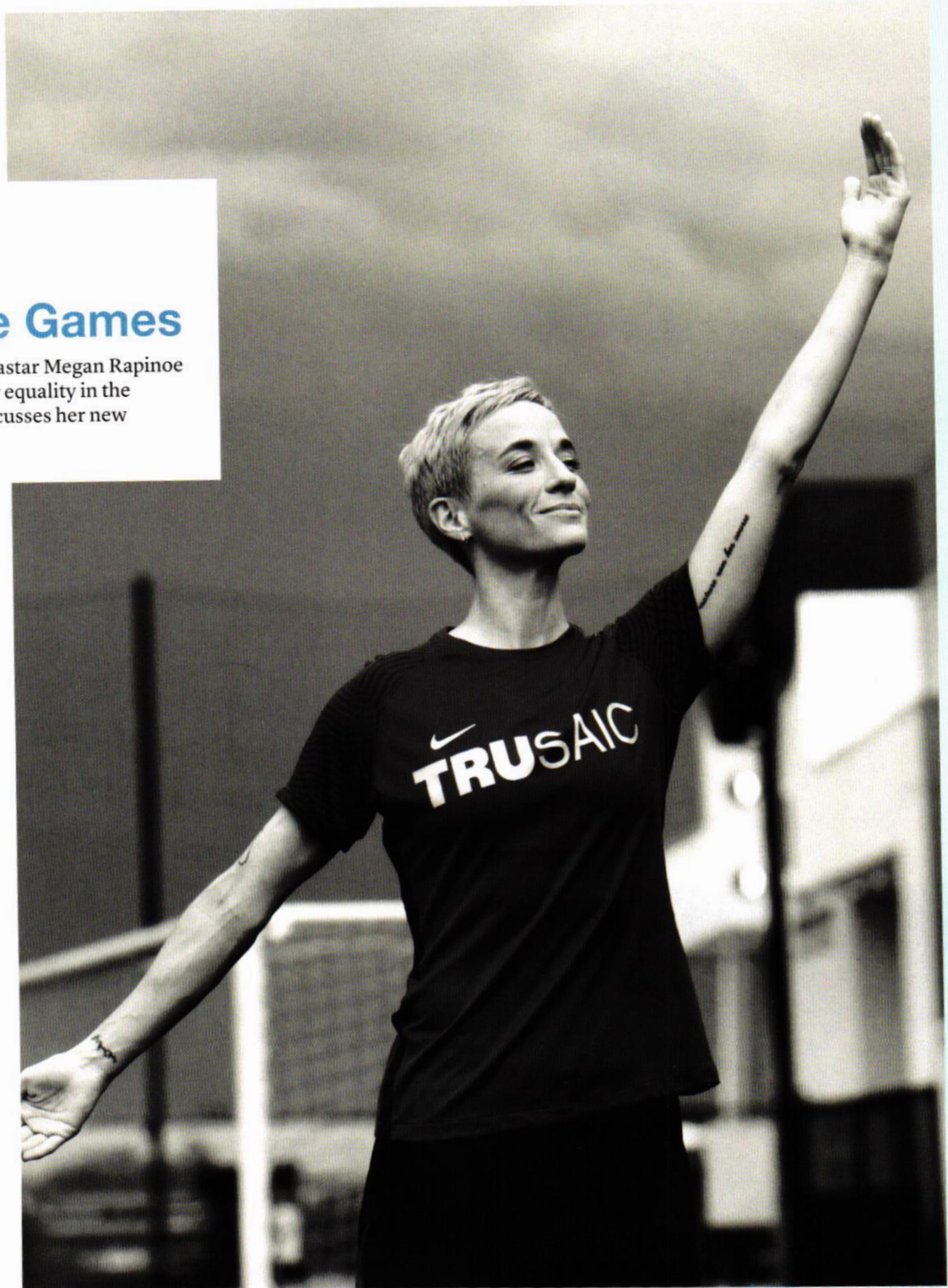
Retiring soccer megastar Megan Rapinoe kicks up her fight for equality in the world arena and discusses her new impact business.

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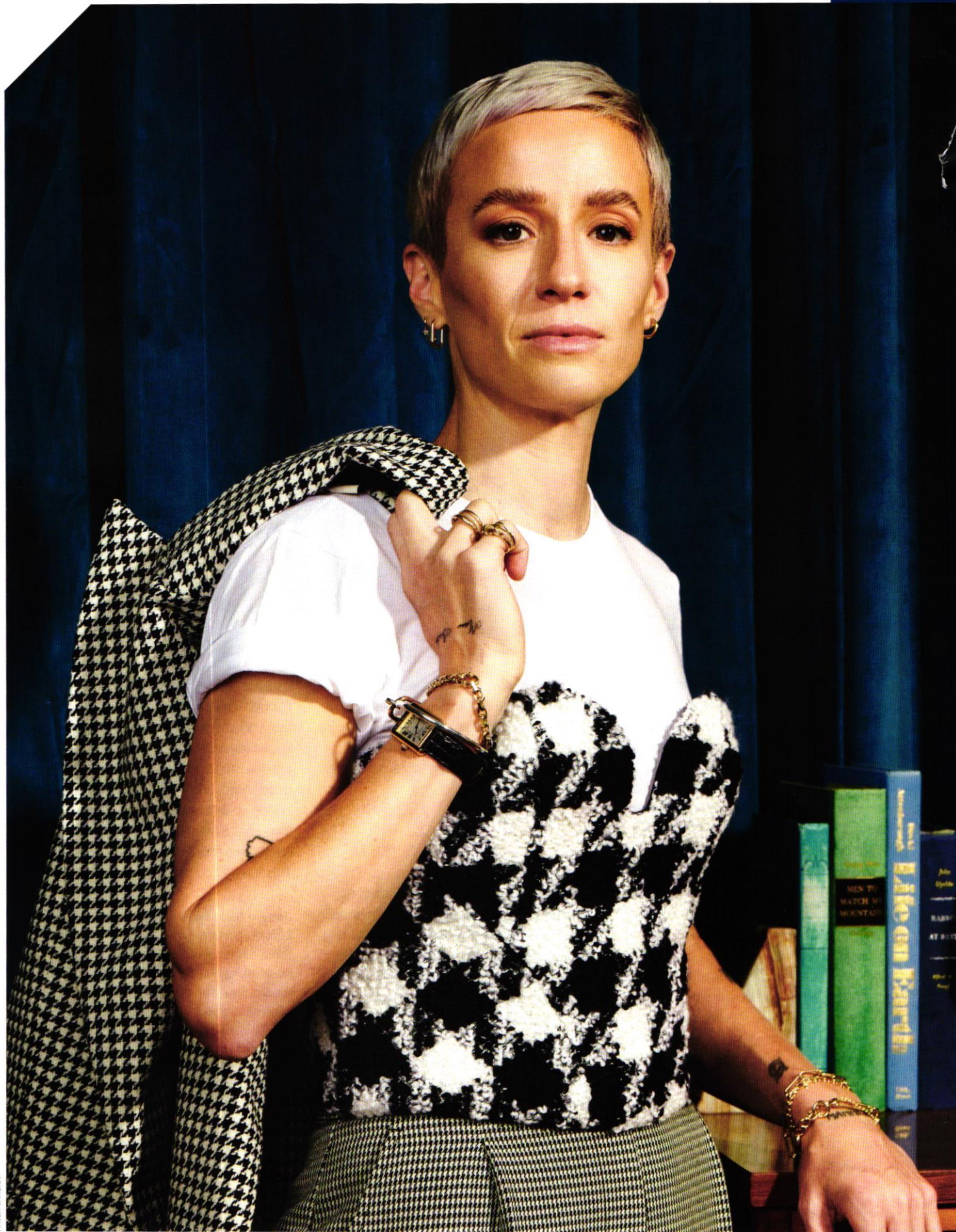
High-tech indoor farms in Appalachia are proving a better way to grow produce.



COVER PHOTO BY RAVEN VARONA

PHOTO COURTESY OF TRUSAIC







NO

MORE

GAMES

**RETIRING SOCCER MEGASTAR MEGAN RAPINOE  
KICKS UP HER FIGHT FOR EQUALITY IN THE  
WORLD ARENA — AND SHARES WHY  
BUSINESSES HAVE NO EXCUSE BUT TO  
CLOSE THE GENDER PAY GAP NOW.**

**BY KATHRYN DEEN**



She has been cheered from the stands by pro soccer fans for 15-plus years. She has been called upon by Congress to testify in a historic fight for gender pay equality. And she has become synonymous with being a disruptor on both world stages. Megan Rapinoe may be hanging up her cleats this year, but her advocacy work is far from finished. In fact, she tells *Real Leaders* that she is just getting started.

Rapinoe will retire as one of the most influential athletes on the planet with two World Cup titles, an Olympic gold medal, and a Presidential Medal of Freedom, and one of the first soccer players to publicly come out as gay. Now, Rapinoe is taking the field for gender equality in full force and is kicking up her activism efforts for LGBTQIA+ rights and racial justice.

Known to passionately speak her mind, Rapinoe reflects with *Real Leaders* on her leadership lessons from the game, why businesses have no excuse but to close the gender pay gap now, the impact company she recently launched with her fiancée, WNBA legend Sue Bird, her desire to make politics “cool,” and a whole lot more. Rapinoe’s new chapter is shaping up to be her most impactful one yet, and in true Rapinoe fashion, she is embracing it with arms wide open.

**Real Leaders: Congratulations on your upcoming retirement from pro soccer. How did preparing for and competing in four World Cups, including as co-captain in 2019, transfer into your leadership strategy in business?**

**Rapinoe:** When you’re playing on a team that has been as successful as the U.S. Women’s National Team where you’re literally playing with and against the best players in the world all the time, you need to have a level of even aspirational confidence in yourself and your teammates. If you’ve made it to the World Cup on the Women’s National Team, you’ve run the gauntlet. You’ve been in a pressure cooker. You’re resilient.

I apply these same qualities — confidence, teamwork, performance under pressure — to leadership in business. For me, I was born with this amazing talent to be an athlete. Just as I grew into a leadership role on the team and tried to be the best player I could be, I’m trying to leverage these skills off the field as well.

Being a leader on a team or in a business means you have to be accountable to yourself and to your teammates. I’ve always been a team-first player, and that definitely carries over to my businesses outside of soccer. I want to be successful, of course, and I want everyone to be successful with me, and I want to be

successful with them. I don’t think individual success actually exists, and the foundation of that belief came from playing on the biggest stage with my teammates. You need everyone to really win at anything.

**RL: You helped lead the charge in the U.S. Women’s National Team’s class action gender discrimination lawsuit against the U.S. Soccer Federation, settled in 2022 with a promise for equal future pay with the men’s team. How is this affecting employee equity in business today? How would you characterize the progress that has been made, and what will it take to reach equal gender pay everywhere?**





**Rapinoe:** We're definitely experiencing a paradigm shift in how we understand the value and potential of women, which has been undervalued for so long.

The Equal Pay Act became law six decades ago, and yet we still hear the statistics: Women make 82 cents for every dollar a man earns. For Black women and women of color, the gap is even greater. The wage gap has hardly moved in 15 years. It's absurd. It's not acceptable or sustainable, and finally it seems like enough people are starting to say "enough" — whether that's U.S. women's soccer, protesters, investors, or employees.

Our victory as a team was really momentous for women's soccer and for all of women's sports and the

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**I want to push people and companies to re-imagine the status quo. We obviously need more women in leadership positions. We need more gay and trans people in leadership. We need a bigger commitment to pay equity and inclusion.**”

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**LIFE**

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Megan Rapinoe and her fiancée, WNBA legend Sue Bird, recently announced their retirements from sports and co-founded A Touch More production company to give a voice to underrepresented groups.

equal pay movement, but the average person doesn't have the platform — much less the bandwidth or the ability or the freedom — to engage in a fight like we did. We need to ensure all working women and all marginalized groups are being paid equitably. As chief equality officer for Trusaic, my goal is to use my platform to bring awareness not only to the problem — because we all know by now that there's a problem — but also to talk about the solutions.

And it's not just about compensation, although obviously being paid fairly is important. For the team, it was also about equal investment and equal caring — that's equal access to resources, investment in coaching, marketing, ticket sales, sponsorship, all of it. In a corporate setting, that looks like equal access to opportunity — who gets the new assignments, the great projects, who gets additional training and development, and who gets promoted.

One thing I believe is that you have to create a space that signals to people that it's safe before they even enter that environment. Maybe that's diversity training, but it's also: What are your hiring practices? How diverse is your workforce? Who do you do business with? What does your executive suite look like? Does everyone look exactly the same? Because that's not going to signal to other people that there's space for them there.

The pressure's been turned up. We know investors are looking more closely at companies and their workplace practices, employees want to work for companies that pay fairly, and customers want to do business with companies that do the right thing. So the pressure is coming from a lot of places, and industries and companies should also put pressure on one another. There should be an element of holding their feet to the fire in this. Legislation and legal action are obviously part of that pressure too.

Companies hold the key to closing the wage gap. There are no longer any excuses. At this point, we have enough information and the tools, like Trusaic's PayParity technology, for companies to get on the other side of this in a real, meaningful way.

**RL:** As a mission-oriented leader, what are your personal and professional missions right now?

**Rapinoe:** My professional mission while I am still playing is to be the best teammate and the best player I can be and to leave the game in a better place for the next generation of players.

My personal mission is to use my platform to fight for gender equality, LGBTQIA+ rights, racial justice, and equal pay. I hope to inspire others through my advocacy and actions to join the fight for equality and justice and help create a more fair and inclusive world.



I am very selective about who I work with, and value alignment is something I take seriously in business. I became chief equality officer last year for Trusaic, which I know your publication recognized earlier this year. (Trusaic was a 2023 Real Leaders Top Impact Company.) They are a workplace equity technology company focused on achieving pay equity, which is obviously very close to my heart. And, of course, I'm involved with my own businesses as co-founder of A Touch More, the production company my fiancée, Sue Bird, and I have formed together to really change what kind of stories are being told and who is telling them.

**RL:** Speaking of co-founding A Touch More with Sue Bird, what are you learning about yourself and each other in this process?

“ I don't think individual success actually exists, and the foundation of that belief came from playing on the biggest stage with my teammates. You need everyone to really win at anything. ”



Rapinoe competed in four World Cups, helping the U.S. win in 2015; and in 2019 as co-captain, top scorer, and best player.

**Rapinoe:** A Touch More was actually created early in the pandemic as an Instagram Live show really just for fun. We had games and different guests. Sue produced the show and it was a blast. It really became about creating community in new ways under unprecedented circumstances. There was so much heaviness, and we just wanted to be a light however we could, even if it was just for a few hours.

So we kept that title for the production company, and our goal now is to create content that centers on stories of revolutionaries who move culture forward. If we can get eyes on these stories, we can broaden the cultural understanding of what it means to move in the world and to be successful when you don't look a certain way or fit a certain mold. We want to partner with people and organizations and brands who want to do the same kind of thing: uplift the culture through powerful narratives.

We've never had any qualms about working together professionally. This experience just reinforces that we're really passionate about the same things. We probably appreciate each other's unique strengths even more, and we can pick each other up in those areas where the other one might fall short. It's really cool to work with someone you love to advance your shared vision for the world. I truly think Sue's brilliance is one of her most underrated qualities publicly.

**RL:** Do you and Bird have any other projects in the works together?

**Rapinoe:** In terms of future projects, activism is probably always going to be at the heart of what we want to do. It's what we both have always believed in as individuals, so it makes sense. We've both had these really influential platforms as athletes, and we know the impact we can make on the world together. It's not about our story and our personal success. Everyone's heard our story. We want to get eyes on things that we feel are really important and not getting enough attention, and we have the resources between us to turn up that light.

**RL:** What areas of your work and mission excite you the most?

**Rapinoe:** I'm really fueled by the opportunity to make a difference for the young athletes who look up to me, for women in the workforce, for trans kids, for marginalized groups that deserve to be championed and to be seen and heard.

I'm excited about finding ways to get more people interested and invested in politics to make politics "cool," not necessarily in the traditional sense, but actually getting people to understand that politics is





In 2022, Rapinoe became the first soccer player to receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest honor for U.S. civilians.

engaging with you, whether you're engaging with it or not. So those could be the decisions that your school system, city government, and insurance company are making. If people realize that when they participate in politics at whatever level, then policies will better reflect the needs and desires of their communities. We can impact our ability to live a better life by being a little bit more involved. If we take the time to understand all the issues we can have a say in, we can hold our elected officials accountable, so that's a big mission of mine.

**RL: How can you leverage your personal brand as an advocate for the businesses you align with?**

**Rapinoe:** Many of the brands that approach me do so because they feel a connection to what I'm doing on the field or what I'm doing and saying off the field, probably some of both. So that might be finding a way to win or to push yourself to the highest level or taking a stand for things that matter — justice, equality, fairness. I'm obviously not shy about putting myself out there, and so I imagine the brands that want to work with me and the brands I want to work with feel the same.

For me, it's how can I leverage my personal "brand" — who I am — for good? How can I make a difference? I'm fortunate to have people who do pay attention to what I say, so I feel a responsibility that comes with that — a responsibility to do what I can

with that influence and try to make the world better, whatever that might look like.

**RL: You've spoken publicly about impact investing. What led you to commit to it?**

**Rapinoe:** Values apply to every aspect of your life, not just some. My personal financial advisor and firm are really committed to impact investing. We definitely want to be successful and make money, but we also want to think about a new path forward. Doing the same things obviously isn't working. I like to invest in companies that are disruptive and progressive and concerned with making a difference in people's lives. My goal is to keep doing this. My portfolio includes Mendi, which is run by my sister, Rachael, and makes CBD products for athletes; Real, which is a mental health startup; and STATSports, which makes wearable technology for athletes.

We are just getting started in this space. There will be more to come. I want to continue to carve out a path for women — who don't acquire as much capital — to come together and build for everyone.

**RL: Whose leadership has inspired you the most — in sports or otherwise?**

**Rapinoe:** My biggest influence on leadership is my mom, Denise Rapinoe. She has always been the leader of our family and like so many women, has



# EQUAL PAY DAY



Rapinoe helped lead the charge for gender pay equality in U.S. pro soccer. She is also standing up for LGBTQIA+ rights and racial justice.

worked tirelessly her entire life to provide for her family, herself, and anyone who needed her. My mother gave me the strength to be who I am today. She taught me how to stand up for what is right, fight for myself, and fight for others who need a helping hand. I absolutely would not be the person everyone knows today without her leadership.

#### **RL: What is your definition of a real leader?**

**Rapinoe:** A real leader is someone who is confident and accountable and creates an environment where everyone feels seen and heard and like they have a place on the team. Being a leader is about being faced with the choice to make the right decision for the greater good and actually choosing it every time. A real leader is not afraid to challenge the status quo to make positive changes within their company, industry, or the world. I don't think there's one right leadership style. It's about serving the person next

to you and the people around you and giving them what they need. Real leaders need to make a point of understanding the people they lead and then being intentional in their actions to support them and bring the very best out of them.

#### **RL: What's next for you?**

**Rapinoe:** Knowing this year would be my last in soccer, I've just tried to really enjoy every moment and appreciate what a special opportunity I have had playing for so long. I'm so grateful for everything this game has given me and so honored to have represented my country for so many years, and it, of course, has opened up many other doors.

I definitely want to continue to use my platform to expand the conversation. It would be irresponsible of me not to. I want to push people and companies to re-imagine the status quo. We obviously need more women in leadership positions. We need more gay and trans people in leadership. We need a bigger commitment to pay equity and inclusion. It's easy for everyone to say they agree with this until it comes time to actually invest in or hire or promote someone who doesn't look like you. We've made some progress, but we certainly have a long way to go. I think a lot about how we can break down these barriers and open more doors for women, Black people and all people of color, gay people, and the people who live in intersecting spaces and have so much perspective to offer all of us.

I'd like to continue to be involved in more projects that get people energized about the civic process and more active in their communities. I don't think enough people get involved when it's not literally their skin in the game, but if you look at the intersectionality of everything, it is all of our skin in the game, so I hope to encourage people to speak up or to take positive action. The most important thing for anyone is to do something — and you don't have to do it perfectly. You don't have to have all of the answers, but don't be scared into inaction because you don't think you have it exactly right.

I feel strongly that the business of Megan Rapinoe can go in all kinds of different directions. I have a lot of irons in the fire. Soccer will always be that touchstone for me, but how can I use that foundation to enter other spaces? That might be fashion, technology, investing, or who knows? We're just getting started. ■

**Kathryn Deen** is managing editor of *Real Leaders*.