

# going green: the power of the individual

by Adam Neugebauer

## “What good can I really do?”

I recently found myself fielding a tangentially related question when my parents asked me if I wanted to speak at the 2008 Working Forum on Nature Education for Young Children in Nebraska City, Nebraska. Sure I was interested, but I work in energy efficiency for residential construction, not early childhood education. So what good could I really do at this event? This question even followed me up to the podium. Afterwards, however, I received some very rewarding feedback, including a few excellent follow-up questions, revealing the common



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builders, government agencies, local jurisdictions, research laboratories, trade organizations, and product manufacturers in order to improve the quality of construction in California and throughout the United States.

Mr. Neugebauer is a graduate of the University of California, Berkeley (Go Bears!); however, his passion for environmental consciousness, especially focusing on energy-related issues, began way back in his ninth grade science class. Clearly it's never too early to start appreciating the natural world, which is why he is excited about connecting with the ECE industry through this series of Green Corner articles.

ground for which I had been looking. And while some may experience it as an indeterminate pang of frustration or a nagging feeling of powerlessness, it all boils down to the same question: “What can I really do?”

Personally, I have been asking myself this question for the last half of my life. And I've never had much of an answer beyond the desire to get into the green collar industry. But even making it there didn't seem to provide a satisfactory conclusion.

I was at my new job where, in a nutshell, we work with builders to help them construct energy-efficient homes. However, when I looked around the office I felt there was a great deal of room for internal improvement:

- Our recycling efforts were minimal.
- Much of our computer equipment was left on at night.
- Our kitchens were stocked with disposable items.
- And the list kept growing.

I realized that we spent a lot of time talking the talk, but not walking the walk. Each week something new would strike me, and I began to wonder how much of the company's positive impacts were be-

ing negated by our wasteful office practices. What really bothered me was that no matter how passionate I was about trying to reduce my own 'footprint' at work, it wasn't going to make much of a difference: I'm not one of the decision makers at work; I don't write employee policies or control company purchasing practices; and it's not my responsibility (nor do I have time) to look over everyone's shoulders to make sure they put their recyclables in the proper bin. So what good could I really do?

The answer eventually came in the form of my coworkers. Some of them, I found out, were dealing with the exact same frustrations. A few of us got together and began venting about the waste we were seeing in the office. Before we knew it, the Green Squad was born. We began having regular lunch meetings so that we could discuss current company practices. And while we didn't really know what, if anything, we would actually be able to accomplish, we started brainstorming some possible solutions. We quickly came up with our first target: The kitchens were stocked with plenty of glasses and mugs and the water filters were checked regularly, so why was our small office going through two cases of bottled water a week?

Before we knew it, we had convinced the office manager to stop buying bottled water for the kitchens. While not exactly a Nobel Prize-worthy achievement, this first little taste of victory was enough to erode our feelings of powerlessness. Our ambitions grew, and we quickly added to our list of accomplishments:

- We found higher post-consumer (recycled) content paper for most of our needs (which also happened to save the company hundreds of dollars a year).
- We replaced the kitchens' disposable products with silverware, extra water glasses, and someone's unused bowls and plates from home.
- And we coordinated the company's first-ever Earth Day event, with local companies and organizations coming to help spread awareness and promote environmentally-friendly home and office behavior.

Our most recent undertaking was an e-waste 'Swap-n-Haul' drive where employees brought in their old, unused electronics equipment; there was a garage sale-like event during the day and then any unsold items were trucked over to the local e-waste recycler. After all was said and done, we had recycled nearly one ton of equipment and raised enough money from the sale to install additional motion sensors for some of the more wasteful office lights. And this was all accomplished by a small group of people who had wanted to make a difference but didn't think that they could.

So next time you feel like you will never be able to make much of an impact, just remember that the solution to your frustrations could be as close as a coworker.

The next installment of the Going Green series will discuss current and cutting-edge lighting options including some common misconceptions. If you have questions or topics that you would like to see discussed in future Going Green articles, send them along to [GreenNeugebauer@gmail.com](mailto:GreenNeugebauer@gmail.com).