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## A Time for Tree Hugging

### A Grassroots Guide to Going Green in L.A. – and Why We Should All Be Doing It.

By Brenda Rees

For my family, every day is a green day. Before my husband, Jim, hops the train to work, he inspects the electric meters on our solar-panel system (32 panels in all!). To his geeky glee, it makes the dials run backward, proving that good ol' Mister Sun is generating about twice as much electricity as we are using. In the afternoons, I tromp outside to the compost bin to greet the worms and mix in the kitchen scraps, I inspect the current crop of vegetables growing in the backyard. Seven-year-old daughter Katie's job is to sort the recycling and hunt for the triangular symbol on plastic containers.

Our gradual green transformation began 13 years ago when we acquired that compost bin cut our weekly garbage load more than half. Since then, we've taken additional – and simple -- eco-friendly steps by turning off the heat at night, regulating our water use and switching to fluorescent light bulbs. Everyday, it seems, we learn something new about how to take better care of our surroundings.

Overall, the environmental movement of the 70s has taken on new life here in 2007 where going green is not only a phrase for celebrities, companies and merchandisers – it's also an everyday fact of life for many Southern California families.

It's of particular note here in Los Angeles County where residents are witnessing effects of daily pollution. Heal the Bay reports that 100 million gallons of contaminated water flows through the storm drain system daily – on rainy days that increases to 10 billion gallons *per day*. The non-profit organization also estimates that a minimum of 10 million pounds of trash enter the Santa Monica Bay every year.

Pollution can also be an unseen killer. According to a release last year by the South Coast Air Quality Management District, Southern California continues to have the "worst overall air pollution...despite the strictest air quality requirements in the nation."

Last year, Southern California racked up 86 days when the federal 8-hour ozone health standard was surpassed. In short, we Angelinos spend about one-fourth of our year breathing air that may cause us permanent lung damage.

And it's not just big people. The ground-breaking USC Children's Health Study reports that "the number of [Southern California] children particularly susceptible to air pollution children with asthma or other respiratory problems is growing."

It's no wonder with such disturbing news, families are starting to take charge of their own eco-destiny by driving hybrid cars, buying biodegradable cleaning products and using natural pesticides in their gardens among other simple – and more complex – green habits.

Indeed, green can mean different things for different families who have to consider economical and practical issues. Sure, I enjoy hanging our clothes outside to dry, but I know many other families don't have the time or space. Still, that doesn't stop Southland families from becoming more environmentally conscious and taking action in their own ways to reduce their carbon footprint on this Earth.

### Saving green

Some families, like the Liflands of Los Angeles, really concentrate on the basics like waste reduction.

The family makes good use of the recycling containers that Dad Kerin built into the kitchen. Mom Jennifer says that it's a constant reminder for the family to pay close attention to their waste. "We are always saying, 'Is this for the landfill or

recycling?” she explains. “I wish everyone could visit a landfill first hand to see the amount of things we throw away on a daily basis.”

Son Noah (7) and daughter Lucia (4) don't find plastic baggies or plastic water bottles in their lunch bags. Instead, they'll discover Tupperware and reusable athletic bottles.

The children routinely take table scraps out the backyard compost pile, says Lifland who is a tree care arborist for TreePeople. Naturally, she says planting and tending trees – something her family is very involved in – “is one of the best things you can do as a family and for the earth.”

For Kathy Arnos, a Van Nuys mom, green changes also started in the kitchen, but soon spread. “Every time I was done with a cleaning product, I would automatically substitute it with an earth-friendly one,” says the organizer of the Whole Children, Whole Planet Expo, a green family event with eco-friendly exhibitors, merchandise and lectures. (The next Expo is scheduled for May, 2008 at the Highland Hall Waldorf School in Northridge.)

Arnos turned to green practices when her then 5-month old daughter Danielle was experienced a number of health issues. Arnos took control of her home environment by eliminating all toxic products that affected her chemically and environmentally sensitive daughter.

Surprisingly, some of those practices saved Arnos money. For example, when she wanted to rid her house of termites she used electrocution as opposed to tradition fumigation. “I got a two year guarantee by going the green way and I would have had only a one year guarantee with the chemical,” she says. “It really was a better way to go.”

### **Inspirational green**

Families often get creative when they go green. The Ptak family of Sherman Oaks use shredded newspapers for not only the cages of 7-year-old son Ian's guinea pigs but also as a decorative touch to gift baskets.

A self-declared packrat, mom Virginia McCrum of Temple City reuses containers, papers and even wrapping paper. “This year, I also simply wrapped items with ribbons (like pretty T-shirts) and used cloth bags,” the stay-at-home-mom writes in an e-mail to *L.A. Parent*.

Those cloth bags, McCrum explains, are part of a new family tradition with her relatives and extended friends who will wrap, send, receive and start the circle all over again.

In addition, McCrum admits that she has done her share of dumpster diving, recently salvaging some Christmas and Halloween decorations – materials that would have instead hit the landfills.

“I'm not suggesting that everyone become a packrat or go searching through their neighbor's trash,” she writes. “But I am promoting keeping your thinking caps on and an eye out for ways you can help the environment at every turn and be open to new creative ideas that come to you in perhaps surprising ways.”

Going homemade is a common thread for these greenies, whether it's gifts, food or cleaning products.

Michelle Rojas-Sota of Eagle Rock makes her own homemade toothpaste and lotion – she finds recipes from web sites and friends. Home solar panels create sun-sponsored energy and hubby Adrian walks to his job as a professor at nearby Occidental College; they look forward to buying a bio-diesel car and plan on making homemade fuel in their backyard.

“I also use a solar cooker and will be building a solar oven soon,” says Rojas-Sota, mom to 17-month-old Evan. Working out of her home office, she says she reduces her paper waste by doing most of her home health care business via e-mail and phone.

“We want these little efforts to make a big difference,” sums up Rojas-Sota.

### **Green work**

While much of going green sounds simple, Ellen Mackey of Sun Valley reminds folks about the flip side to being environmentally friendly. “It is *work*, it's not the easy way out,” declares the ecologist for the Metropolitan Water District who says that green living “is a process and it never ends.”

When Mackey and her two daughters Rebecca and Alexia moved into their new home in 1996 and got their first DWP bill, she was aghast. “I remember saying, ‘Nope, we're not doing that again!’” she recalls.

That's when the work began: Mackey changed out light bulbs and covered windows with solar coating. Then, she did the unthinkable: she stopped watering the lawn. "My neighbors hated me, but I refused to use that much water for just grass," she says.

Forgoing a lawn and planting instead native plants and fruit trees, Mackey says green chores are a fact of life at her home. After dishes are washed, the used water is brought outside to water trees – a simple gray water system. A fire place insert generates heat in the winter and the family routinely prunes wood from the backyard orchards for fire starting material.

Mackey is forever researching new products as she renovates her home to make it even more green. She's discovered that some of more exotic-sounding materials – such as counter tops made of recycled waste – are now found in, of all places, big chain stores like Home Depot.

"Some of that stuff is carefully hidden right in front of you," she says.

Indeed, today homeowners have a variety of resources available when remodeling or building their homes in a green fashion. Mary and Bruce Lyons of Brentwood spent 3 years building their home from the ground up using sustainable materials including bamboo ceilings, a natural slate floor in the kitchen and recycled rubber roof shingles.

"My son Michael's cub scout troupe would come and watch the building because we were doing some unique green things," says Mary, a craft artist, about the house that is designed with thick adobe walls that keep out the summer heat and yet catch and contain cool breezes.

"With this house, I feel like I finally put my money where my mouth is," notes Mary.

### **A green place of mind**

But green living can go well beyond swapping out products and/or materials – it's also about families making choices involving non-tangible experiences.

For example, Brian and Susan Jensen of West Hills find that even their hobbies can be ecologically friendly. "We like to hike and bike," says Brian who's dad to 4-year-old Henry and 4-month-old Rose. "We go land-yachting up in El Mirage/Palmdale area with a 3-wheel sailboat that uses wind power. It's loads of fun."

Gifts can be green too. Parents of 21-month old Rosalind, Kathryn Bickel and Jeffrey Goldman of Sherman Oaks have been giving out carbon neutral donation cards from Carbon Fund for birthdays and weddings. (The organization, [www.carbonfund.org](http://www.carbonfund.org), supports renewable energy sources as well as reforestation projects.)

"The people we've given them to have been very appreciative," says Bickel, an environmental consultant. "As we get older, we realize we don't so much stuff anymore. This kind of gift can be more meaningful."

But even younger kids seem to know the value of simplicity.

When Mackey's youngest daughter Alexia turned 8, she wanted her birthday party that would be a fundraiser for Heifer International, a non-profit organization that strives to end world hunger through self-reliance.

In addition, the party was also a non-plastic event since Alexia had recently seen a film about plastic waste ending up in the ocean.

"She really wants to be part of the solution and has early on made the connection between her actions and consequences," sums up Mackey. The non-plastic approach did force parents to think up some creative gifts which, in the end, was a learning experience for everyone.

"This next generation may surprise us," says Mackey with a hopeful pause. "Their future can certainly be a better place, but it's going to take work."

## <Resources>

### On the Web

- Greenopia – [www.greenopia.com](http://www.greenopia.com) – calls itself the urban dwellers guide to green living. Based in SoCal, the site is a neighborhood guide with lists of restaurants, dry cleaners, pet stores, beauty shops and other eco-friendly locales
- I Buy Different – [www.ibuydifferent.org](http://www.ibuydifferent.org) – encourages teens to do their part in protecting the environment through wise choices, smart shopping and community activism. Sponsored by the World Wildlife Fund and the Center for a New American Dream.
- Junk K – [www.junkk.com](http://www.junkk.com) – is a forum and online community that shares advice on ideas on how to reduce, reuse, repair and recycle items.
- L.A. Green Living – [www.lagreenliving.com](http://www.lagreenliving.com) – offers green tips, events and a directory of local services and products.
- My Footprint – [www.myfootprint.org](http://www.myfootprint.org) – is an eye-opening experiment to determine your “ecological footprint” – i.e. your consumption rate of goods and services. Answer questions and learn ways to reduce your carbon impact.
- New American Dream – [www.newdream.org](http://www.newdream.org) – offers resources to live consciously buy wise and join with others in their communities.
- Treehuggers – [www.treehuggers.com](http://www.treehuggers.com) – provides in-depth articles on a variety of sustainable living practices along with simple everyday tips to, as they say, “get us out of this mess.”
- Smart Homeowner – [www.smart-homeowner.com](http://www.smart-homeowner.com) – navigates through the myriad of options homeowners can do to make their houses more energy efficient, healthy and eco-friendly.

### Books

- *365 Ways to Change the World: How to Make A Difference – One Day At A Time*, by Michael Norton, Free Press, 2007.

Norton spent two years researching and collecting ideas for this practical guide that encourages transformational tidbits and how tos from the simple to the profound.

- *Organic Housekeeping In Which the Non-Toxic Avenger Shows You How to Improve Your Health and That of Your Family, While You Save Time, Money, and, Perhaps, Your Sanity*, by Ellen Sandbeck, Scribner, 2006.

Former professional housecleaner and roofer, Sandbeck explains the value of avoiding toxins and pesticides in the home – all told with a light-hearted and comedic flair.

- *The Ten Minute Activist: Easy Ways to Take Back the Planet* by the Mission Collective, Nation Books, 2007.

Think small and do big things say the contributors who advocate practical solutions to change the world for the better.

### Other events

- **“Simple Saturdays”** is a free monthly program with environmental topics and ecological themes held the second Saturday at the El Dorado Nature Center, 7550 E. Spring St. in Long Beach. 9am – 2:30pm. 562-570-1745.
- **“Every Day is Earthday”** is a regular free program on how to be earth-friendly by remembering the 3R’s – recycle, reduce and reuse. Held at Franklin Canyon in Beverly Hills. Call for next program date and times. 310-858-7272, ext. 131.
- **Tours of the Eco-Home™**, an environmental demonstration home in the Los Feliz area, are offered twice a month. Upcoming tours are scheduled for April 8 and 22 as well as May 6 and 20. Reservations required. \$10 suggested donation. 323-662-5207.
- **Environmental Change-Makers**, holds monthly meetings with speakers and topics promoting sustainable practices. Meetings are held on the fourth Thursday of every month from 7-9pm at the Church of the Holy Nativity, 6700 W. 83rd St., in Westchester. 310-670-4777, [www.envirochangemakers.org](http://www.envirochangemakers.org).

## **A messy issue turns green**

Ever since disposable diapers were introduced in 1961, adults have sung the praises of the plastic throw-away solution to one of parenthood's messier tasks. They were convenient, cheap and just perfect for that on-the-go mom.

Ultimately, they were too good to be true.

Today, disposals make up 90-95 percent of the diaper market, and that figure has many environmentalists worried. Since an average child uses about 6,000 diapers before toilet training, the average total waste a landfill receives in a year is a whopping 16 billion diapers or 2.7 million tons, according an Ohio State University Extension Fact Sheet compiled by Joyce A. Smith and Norma Pitts.

Old-fashioned cloth diapers, however, are also not without stain. These cloth diapers made of cotton – an environmentally hard crop to grow – are usually part of a delivery service that uses tons of water and energy to wash and dry them. That continual laundering – often with energy inefficient front loading machines – contributes to increased levels of water and air pollution.

Luckily, a new green solution has hit the American shores which could offer a solution to the constant problem of what to do with the poop.

"We are proponents of the gDiaper which is a flushable, all natural diaper that is very earth-friendly," says Christopher Gavigan, executive director of the Children's Health Environmental Coalition, a 16-year-old organization based in Los Angeles that advocates environmental choices for parents.

Originating from Australia by green-conscious parents and hitting the streets about a year and a half ago, this diaper system is a natural flushable inserts set inside a liner all snuggled together in a cotton/elastene fabric pant.

"There's no latex, ink, perfume or chlorine," says Gavigan who explains that the soft fluffy wood pulp inserts can simply be flushed down a toilet where water treatment systems break down the components naturally. "They become bio-solids and are put back into the food chain and become, for example, fertilizer for trees."

Families can also easily dispose of gDiapers in their own compost.

Still, the gDiaper is not without its problems. "I really liked the idea of them," says Kathryn Bickel of Sherman Oaks who discovered that daughter Rosalind's sensitive backside developed a rash after using them. "Maybe they would have worked better if I started her on them from the beginning," she muses.

Gavigan sympathizes with the diaper dilemma, but given not only the landfill issues, the problem with disposables lies also in their design. "They are made of a soft plastic that leaks phthalates which can get into the body and disrupt hormone functions," he explains. "This is especially scary when you think of children – at a very young age – who are near this kind of chemical that's linked with cancers not to mention developmental and endocrine problems."

Green disposables such as Seventh Generation diapers for example, have some ecological advantages because they are chlorine-free which doesn't contribute to dioxin pollution, says Gavigan.

Overall, the diaper decision has sent some families back to the old fashioned clothes line. "We wash diapers at home and dry them outside," says Michelle Rojas-Soto of Eagle Rock. "It's the way our parents did it and they had just as complicated lives as well do. So why can't we do the same thing?"

*For more information about gDiapers, go to [www.gdiapers.com](http://www.gdiapers.com). Check for gDiapers at local Whole Foods and Wild Oats markets.*

## **Green Going 101**

"You have to pick the low hanging fruit first and then work your way up," sums up actor/environmentalist Ed Begley, Jr. about his journey into greendom. Talking with *L.A. Parent*, Begley says the process to becoming environmentally-friendly is much like climbing a ladder. "You try a few things, they work and then you try a few more. Pretty soon you're moving up and making bigger and bigger changes," he says.

The star of a new reality show *Living with Ed* on HGTV about – surprise! – ecologically living, Begley is father to two grown children and now a 7-year-old daughter. He started out on the green path in the 1970s with a vegetable garden and composting. Soon, he was recycling, using an electric bike and putting up solar panels.

His latest endeavor? "I'm currently looking at installing a gray water system," he says which will funnel used water (except toilet water) from his Studio City home outside for landscape irrigation. "There are still plenty of things I want to accomplish," he says. "I'm not done yet!"

Here's a list of things families can do to start the greening process:

- Bring your own canvas bags when shopping.
- Install fluorescent light bulbs that last for years at a fraction of the cost. Buy energy efficient appliances (check rebates from the DWP). Also, be conscious of your phantom power sources – things that use energy even when they aren't turned on such as TV sets, fax machines and lights – and physically unplug them when you can.
- Weatherize your house or apartment. Seal up leaks in windows and electrical outlets and have proper insulation. Consider having an energy audit to find your trouble spots. Check out the non-profit organization California Home Energy Efficiently Rating Services at 800-4CHEERS (1-800-424-3377) or [www.cheers.org](http://www.cheers.org).
- Recycle everything you can such as cardboard, glass, plastics (#1-17) and, as of last year, plastic shopping bags and newspaper bags. For a complete list, go to [www.lacity.org/SAN/solid\\_resources/recycling/what\\_is\\_recyclable.htm](http://www.lacity.org/SAN/solid_resources/recycling/what_is_recyclable.htm).
- Get a free bathroom makeover by contacting the DWP for free ultra-low flush toilets, showerheads and faucet aerators. 800-203-7380 or [www.ladwp.com](http://www.ladwp.com).
- Support local and organic foods that aren't flown, trucked or boated in from elsewhere – think of that energy waste! Also try to eat red meat only once a week – cattle and processing contribute a substantial portion of the total carbon emissions.
- Close the loop and purchase products that use recyclable materials. Eliminate Styrofoam and plastic sandwich baggies right out of your life.
- Properly discard hazardous wastes (paint, pesticides, motor oil, etc.) at regular S.A.F.E. centers and mobile collection sites sponsored by the Bureau of Sanitation. Don't throw light bulbs and household batteries away – they, too, are hazardous as are electronic waste – computers, faxes, cell phones, etc. To find a collection site, call 1-888-CLEAN-LA (888-253-2652) or go to [www.888CleanLA.com](http://www.888CleanLA.com)
- Whenever possible, leave the car at home. Walk, bike, train or carpool.
- Give alternative gifts and avoid material temptations. Seek out earth-friendly organizations for donations, make hand-made items, spend more time playing.
- And finally, visit a landfill. See the choking reality of our human life in the 21st century. Do it as a family and return home resolved to do your share to reduce your waste, be more responsible for your choices and find all alternatives that you can.