

Live like a green heroine - and hold the stuff

Noelle Robbins, Special to The Chronicle

Wednesday, April 8, 2009



[More...](#)

Annie Leonard, named one of Time magazine's 2008 Environmental Heroes, knows better than most: It's not so easy living green.

Leonard created and narrates the international Web documentary phenomenon "Story of Stuff," which summarizes her 20 years of global sleuthing: tracking the source of the stuff we buy and the fate of the stuff we throw away. This lively animated film makes the point that if everyone on Earth consumed at U.S. levels, we would need five planets.

Leading by example, Leonard shows how simple steps and a little patience can help people create environmentally friendly, energy-efficient, stuff-free lives.

In her cozy Berkeley home, the first clue sits in her driveway: A blue ZENN, or zero emission no noise, electric vehicle. The car is a NEV, or neighborhood electric vehicle, which is a U.S. Department of Transportation classification for speed-limited battery electric vehicles.

The car quietly sucks sun power from solar panels on Leonard's roof and only goes 25 mph, which is just fine with her. "I am always racing around, and this forces me to move at a slower pace. I need any help I can get to do that."

It's hard to picture Leonard, a verbal dynamo with a mission-driven personality, slowing down, but that is one of her primary stress-free, stuff-free strategies.

Leonard didn't go solar just to charge her car. She says she did it to save mountaintops in Appalachia. "ILoveMountains.org uses Google Earth technology to show coal mine destruction of mountains - the environmental and social devastation. It's really intense. You type in your ZIP code and see the lines of power plants supplying your house. There is mountaintop-removal coal going into my grid. I don't want any part of that."

Leonard, who never lets a teachable moment slide by if she can help it, does wish her solar power system were more visible from the street - all the better to educate passers-by.

Clotheslines and worms

Leonard knows going solar can be pricey and says government should make it easier and cheaper for people to make the transition. But in the meantime, she says, "There are other

things we can do that don't cost a lot of money. Like clotheslines. Why doesn't every single person in California have clotheslines?"

One day Leonard was hanging laundry on her clothesline when her neighbors asked, "Is your dryer broken?"

Her answer: "We're 5 percent of the world's population; we're using 30 percent of the world's energy. I'm trying to help out."

She uses her clothesline year-round. "I love it, not only because of the ecological thing, but because it makes me stand in my garden."

When Leonard is in her garden, she also visits her worms, busy composting her organic waste in a bin purchased at discount from Alameda County Waste Management.

"I'm really into worm composting. It's embarrassing to talk about, it has such a hippie connotation. But the truth is home composting is incredibly important," she says. Leonard, who loves tracking waste, once followed a green barrel recycling truck to a composting site. She drove 120 miles.

"It's outrageous," she says, shaking her head in disbelief. "In a lot of composting operations 80 percent of the cost is driving the stuff around."

Leonard admits she's not a gardener. But thanks to her neighbors, she doesn't have to be. "The No. 1 thing I do to reduce my consumption? I live in a community," she says. "My friends and I have six houses on this block, which makes it so much easier to live ecologically because you don't have to do everything yourself."

Leonard's kampung - Indonesian for families living together - has grown over 18 years. Members share and borrow stuff, which saves money. More importantly, "every time you borrow something, you build community social fabric," which, says Leonard, "is the No. 1 thing that is going to get us through this economic and ecological crisis."

Another bonus? "There are a lot of really serious gardeners who live here," she says. "I live in a Monet painting with my best friends."

It takes a community

Much of the stuff Leonard's kampung shares and borrows is scavenged and salvaged from the streets, including trees and plants for the garden, and from the Freecycle Network, a grassroots movement of people giving or getting stuff for free. Urban Ore in Berkeley is one of Leonard's favorite shopping spots.

"They look like Goodwill, but have a political agenda," she says. "Every receipt says, 'Ending the age of waste.'" Urban Ore doesn't use the word "waste" to describe its reclaimed furniture, construction supplies and kitchenwares - the preferred portrayal is "resources in the wrong place." Leonard outfitted her entire office with Urban Ore finds.

Little things count, too, in Leonard's household: a recycled telephone-wire whisk broom; license plate dustpan; and wastebasket constructed of baby formula cans. Add in place mats woven from old magazines and everything old is new again.

One of her most exciting finds, which eliminates wasteful packaging in her daughter Dewi's school lunches, are compartmentalized metal tiffin lunch boxes from India.

"It's so funny. Some people think I am anti-stuff, and it's the opposite. I am pro stuff, but I am pro having reverence for the stuff we have.

"Everyone should visit a dump before they get a driver's license; something to force people to see the hidden life cycle of their stuff. The more you see, I believe, the greater reverence you have for it."

Leonard's decades of international travel helped lay the groundwork for appreciating the stuff in her life. "In Bangladesh, I got one bucket of cold water every morning," she remembers. Sometimes her hosts, feeling sorry for her, would heat up one bucket of water to mix with the cold. "They were using their cooking fuel to heat me a bucket of water. So it taught me to be grateful - one bucket of hot water is a good day."

Stuff-free lifestyle

A stuff-free life can be easier, less expensive and more fun than you might guess. Here are some tips from Annie Leonard.

Watch it: Spend 20 minutes watching the "Story of Stuff" at storyofstuff.com. Check out "Greensumption," a tongue-in-cheek look at our efforts to shop our way to a greener world, at YouTube.com.

Log on: Track the source of the power in your electric grid by plugging your ZIP code into ilovemountains.org. Maybe you can save a few mountaintops from coal-mining destruction.

Get wormy: Alameda County Waste Management offers compost bins at a discount and delivers them to your door. It also offers a Bay-Friendly Gardening Workshop Series. Go to stopwaste.org.

Plug in: Save money on your electric bill, discover how much power your appliances devour every day and predict future costs with Kill A Watt. Available for about \$25 online.

Drive by: Or, better yet, walk to Green Motors in Berkeley to peruse its range of "electric vehicles for a cooler world." Go to gogreenmotors.com.

Get sunny: Consider plugging into the sun for electric power. Sungevity employs "green job" participants on each project. Go to sungevity.com. And use a clothesline.

Get free stuff: Join the Freecycle Network, a global grassroots, nonprofit movement of people getting and giving away free stuff in your hometown. Remember, your junk is someone else's treasure. Go to freecycle.org.

Shop smart: Urban Ore in Berkeley carries anything and everything: building supplies, furniture and housewares. Its goal? To end the age of waste by encouraging recycling. urbanore.yppguides.net.

Box it up: Reduce the packaging and increase the fun factor in lunches. Pack them in a tiffin, a metal compartmentalized lunch box. You can find tiffins at Indian stores throughout the Bay Area or try To-Go Ware in Berkeley. Go to www.to-goware.com.

Speak up: Write letters or send e-mails to the local paper and local elected officials. Tell them where you want your tax dollars to go to support a kinder, greener world.

- N.R.

E-mail comments to home@sfchronicle.com.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/04/08/DDA815VQAH.DTL>

This article appeared on page **E - 1** of the San Francisco Chronicle

