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Lori Braunstein from Sustainable Cherry Hill

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Lori Braunstein is the Executive Director and Founder of Sustainable Cherry Hill. Under Lori's leadership – and with the help of some committed volunteers – SCH is bringing about the sort of change that is only possible when local people work together toward common goals. These important changes are transforming Cherry Hill into a more inclusive, vibrant, and sustainable place to live. Lori very kindly agreed to speak with us.

Q: Can you tell us a little bit about your background and how you came to be involved with SCH?

A: I'm from Cherry Hill, New Jersey. I was born and raised here. I went to school here. I went away to College and Grad School then came back. I live in Cherry Hill and have raised my family here, so I have really strong ties to the local community.

I never really considered myself an environmentalist, but rather viewed myself as an active community member and parent. As a mom, I started to think about the world we were leaving for our children. The more research I did, the more I realized there really was something to be concerned about. Essentially, we're using up our natural resources faster than they can be replenished.

I realized that government – although an important part of any potential solution – would never provide a complete answer. I was also aware that we have a large community of people with a vested interest in ensuring the continued viability of the neighborhood they live in.

Over the course of 18 months, and at a point in time before the whole green movement gathered pace, our township developed a Green Action Plan. Sustainable Cherry Hill is the community arm of our township's green action plan.

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LIFESTYLE

Q: There are an increasing number of “globally-focused” environmental initiatives. One of the things I love about SCH is its local focus. How important is SCH’s local community in bringing about positive change?

A: The whole philosophy behind SCH is that we recognize that large organizational structures, like government, school systems and corporations need to change course in order for meaningful change to occur. Grassroots cannot do it alone. But... grassroots can get educated and engaged and put upward pressure on these large institutions as constituents and customers.

SCH realizes that everyday people, not just environmentalists, have a reason to care about a sustainable future. We reach out to people with diverse programming and affinity groups. We engage moms, dads, business owners, people of faith, government officials, school board members, etc around the topics they are passionate about. We provide an infrastructure, leadership and momentum for regular people to work on sustainability.

Our local government and beyond, have paid attention to what we are doing and listen to us because we have authentic (and positive) grassroots support. We also embrace sustainability on a regional level and welcome/support the efforts of anyone in South Jersey who is working on community sustainability.

What are we NOT? We are not an advocacy group for specific issues, like cleaning up a pond or against certain issues, like widening a highway. We are not “against” things, like nuclear power or a pro-development political candidate. We envision what could be and then we work towards achieving it while engaging as many diverse people as we can in the process.

Q: Can you give us an overview of the types of projects and initiatives SCH gets involved in?

A: Basically, we do educational programming, outreach (speaking) to community, networking so that like minded people can “cross pollinate” and work directly with our township to do strategic planning on policy/procedures. Some of our accomplishments include:

- Assisting Cherry Hill Township with the development of their “10 Point Green Action Plan”
- Assisting in the development and passage of No Idling resolution with CH Town Council and CH Board of Education in 2009/9.
- Co-sponsorship of National Public Lands Day with CH Environmental Advisory Committee (CHEAC), which brought out dozens of community members to do tree/trail maintenance on public land in 2008.
- Hosting the first ever “green” section at CH Fall Festival in 2008, followed by complete “Earth Day” festivals in 2009 and 2010.
- Hosting a community visioning conference in Summer 2009, “Cherry Hill 2020: Shaping a Sustainable Future” in which almost 100 diverse community stakeholders participated for three days to come up with an agenda for sustainability and resulting task forces for action. And [much more...](#)

Q: SCH has a task force focusing on alternate transportation. How important are alternative forms of transportation in making our communities more liveable? How are motorists responding to the increasing number of pedestrians and cyclists throughout Cherry Hill?

A: This is a very challenging issue in Cherry Hill. We are totally built out and car-centric. The Way to Go task force is working with the township on making decisions and planning for ways to make our infrastructure more pedestrian/bike friendly. The group is supporting the township’s efforts to gain funding for sidewalks, bikepaths, etc by writing letters of support, doing research and utilizing untapped resources in the community.

The township had not done much in this area over the past 5 years and the experience of working with a community group like ours has moved them into a more active state with their plans. They



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have asked the group to help them with community outreach to determine priorities/needs for better traffic calming and safer ped/bike routes.

Q: How important are Cherry Hill's community gardening initiatives?

A: The township has a community garden, which rents out plots to people who want to grow their own produce. The effort is a little stale and not very engaged in the community. SCH had a garden/food task force for a while, but it sort of broke up due to some leadership challenges.

We recently were approached by a few community members who were interested in getting it restarted. Efforts are now underway to link the task force to the township's community gardens. We are just starting to re-engage with this, so stay tuned.

Since we are totally volunteer driven, we can only take on efforts that have the interest and support of people in the community. It is challenging at times, but we are not a top down type of organization. It's more distributed leadership structure. We help you do what you want to do.

Q: SCH seems to have the support of the local Mayor and the Cherry Hill Town Council. How important is gaining that level of support for organizations such as SCH?

A: The relationship with the township has been carefully cultivated from the start. In the beginning, we were just a few concerned citizens working with a few township people on a "green action plan". We would not have been "born" without the support of the township. We are one of the 10 points on their "10 point green action plan". However, we are an independent non profit and have had some challenges and conflicts with them. Over the past 3(ish) years, we have worked out a really nice partnership. They recognize that we are a vibrant, effective community group and we have mostly aligned interests. It is to their benefit to work with us (and vice versa) and the community benefits.

Q: What are the greatest obstacles facing society as we attempt to transition toward a more sustainable existence?

A: I think the greatest obstacle is that people and the systems they function within have been slow to change their paradigm about how we view sustainability. We are just beginning to understand that we cannot hope to thrive (or survive) as a species if we keep undermining the very systems that we depend on for that survival. The earth is not something "over there". We are part of a system and need to live within the means of that system or face the consequences.

I look at this time as the greatest opportunity for us. Yes, it is a crisis, but it is also the time to create, innovate and learn to live in a new way. We need to take a long term view of our decisions and stop making short term, politically expedient choices.

Our large corporations are starting to get it and are making plans for sustainability based on realistic risk assessment and long term business growth. Sadly, our governments do not seem to be learning the same lessons. That's why we need an educated and engaged grassroots to keep these large entities moving in the right direction.

Q: When you look around your community, what are some of the things that make you optimistic about the future?

A: I am heartened by the number of people who come out to our events, step up to work in a task force or just talk to me about how much they care about certain issues. Most people don't know how to get a movement started, but are happy to join in once they see it is positive and even fun. People who are involved with us talk about the sense of community they feel by being a part of this effort.

I am also hopeful about the changes taking place in large corporations, green building, waste management, energy and organizations like Sustainable Jersey (www.sustainablejersey.com) who

are providing a toolkit/certification program for communities to become more sustainable.

Q: If we could all take three small steps today toward treating each other and the planet with a little more courtesy, what should they be?

- Understand that we are all connected to each other and the planet. We don't have to feel the consequences of our consumption if we export our waste and pollution to our neighbors living in poverty.
- Think about how you are using resources and creating waste. Can you imagine a future where there is no waste? It is possible.
- Realize how much power you have as a community. Get together with others who care about this stuff. Passions will grow exponentially and our traditional power structures will take notice.

Q: What are some of the exciting projects we can expect from SCH in 2011 and beyond?

A: There are some really exciting projects coming up, including:

- Planning a regional sustainable communities gathering
- Co-sponsoring an environmental justice lecture series at our local community college and doing a community tree planting in neighboring Camden
- Making a big push to integrate sustainability concepts into our school district
- Working with the township on achieving the next level of Sustainable Jersey certification
- Working with the township on expanding our recycling program to include more plastics, food waste, oil, etc
- Planning more educational programming
- Supporting our task forces in their individual efforts
- Planning township partnered Earth Festival 2011

Stay tuned...

Organic Guide wishes to thank Lori Braunstein for generously sharing her time and insights. To find out more about Lori and the important work being done, please visit [Sustainable Cherry Hill](#).

Category: [People](#)

Keywords: Lori Braunstein, Sustainable Cherry Hill, SCH, Sustainable Jersey, community, environment, Green Action, education

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