

# Growing your Grassroots Community

*Creating Environmental Change Your Neighborhood*

"Think Globally, Act Locally" says the old bumper sticker. But between freeways and skyscrapers, SUVs and soccer schedules, how do we create real environmental change in our cities?

Some thinkers insist that solutions must come top-down, from legislation and political solutions. Other brave souls set out to prove that by transforming our individual lifestyles we can cultivate enormous good for the environment. Given the timeframe over which we must work, I think we need both: top-down *and* grassroots, simultaneously.

**Going local.** Local means reclaiming our neighborhoods. Our identities. Our sense of place and of community. Connecting with the guy next door. Local means supporting local businesses, growing the local economy. Local means less fossil fuels (with accompanying greenhouse gas emissions) for transportation of food, goods, services. Local means re-learning the beauty of your immediate surroundings, from fresh in-season produce, to natural vistas, to unique culture and charm.

Here in Los Angeles — actually I'll say "here in Westchester," because Los Angeles is an enormous sprawling conglomerate of neighborhoods, and I focus on my own immediate neighborhood — I'm a community builder. When I first came to town, I helped form a homeschool network. After I wrote my book, we formed the Environmental Change-Makers.

The Environmental Change-Makers are a group focused on positive action on our urban environmental issues. We sometimes focus on the big issues, like trying to get the California Global Warming Solutions Act passed. But just as often, we focus on our immediate neighborhood, its issues, and transforming the consciousness of our members.

*We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking  
we used when we created them. --Einstein*

Solving our environmental issues requires new ways of thinking — a reevaluation of previous goals, dreams, visions for society's future — a paradigm shift.

We've long been used to evaluating potential purchases on whether item A or item B costs less dollars. In this new era, the cost we must compare is the impact on the earth's resources: the raw materials consumed in manufacture; the fossil fuels and corresponding greenhouse gas emissions of transporting the item from another continent; the landfill impact of the packaging; and whether we really need the item in the first place.

This journey of ReThinking is one of the biggest issues of the environmental transformation. A cultural change.

We can do it, when we focus on local grassroots and neighborhood change. When we "go local" we get to know our neighbors. When we work one-on-one at the individual level, we can support each other to change.

*continued*

Joanne Poyourow  
Author of Legacy, the visionary environmental novel

[www.LegacyLA.net](http://www.LegacyLA.net)

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**It's easier in a peer group.** Big change — lifestyle transformation — can be tough. It can seem like an insurmountable upheaval. Or it can be a fun and exciting adventure.

When we make big changes together with family and friends, we're no longer striking out alone. We're within a crowd of like-minded others.

Ever have someone cheer that you took cloth bags to market? Give you a standing ovation that you finally set up that composter? At the Environmental Change-Makers, that's what we do. We open each meeting with Positive Environmental News when we share good news stories from the green press, and when we share our individual baby steps. This is when you get to really know your neighbors. You learn who's changing to CFL bulbs and who is trying to get a green article published in a mainstream paper. You learn each other's hopes, projects, goals. And you begin to build and share a common dream.

## How To Form a Network of Environmental Change-Makers in Your Neighborhood

1) **Start where you are.** Start in your own neighborhood. Find a few like-minded others. Start simply. Perhaps just meet for coffee. Invite newcomers as you find them. Begin.

2) **Hocus pocus, we've got a focus.** There's incredible power in knowing what you want to do. Hold a clear vision. You wouldn't leave on a long trip without having a road map. For both the homeschool group and the Environmental Change-Makers, I created a carefully-thought-out written document which defined the group ([www.envirochangemakers.org/ECM.about.htm](http://www.envirochangemakers.org/ECM.about.htm)). Some non-profits create a Mission Statement, and this isn't too different. You, and your new members, must know what you are about and why. Yes, the document may get revised as you grow and develop. But time and again, rereading that vision has helped clarify our decision-making and our direction.

3) **Surround them with solutions.** There are many organizations which mobilize around problems. The whales. The rainforests. The butterflies. The Environmental Change-Makers is unique in that we focus on solutions: What Can We Do. By constantly showcasing environmental solutions, in our meeting topics, our handouts, discussions and displays, and in our individual lifestyles, we remind people what is possible. People want to join a movement that's successful. If you collect positive resources, you'll find that you become a vortex — people soon begin bringing even more solutions to your attention!

4) **Be a cheerleader.** Everyone wants to feel appreciated. But in the midst of mainstream society, we often get exactly the opposite as people disparage our cloth bags and bus schedules. Create a place where people feel rewarded and noticed for the earth-friendly things they do. I've already described the Positive Environmental News section of our meetings. Acknowledge progress, no matter how small. Remind each other that little things add to little things and become big things. Remember that the rise of a bell curve starts small, before it gathers tremendous momentum. Celebrate the baby steps which begin the transformation.

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5) **Know your neighbors.** We've become accustomed to corporate one-size-fits-all systems. By contrast, creating a local grassroots group is a fully custom project. "Local" has a different flavor for you than it does for me. Your neighborhood has different issues, different personalities, different resources. It's up to you and your fellow members to discover these precious attributes, and to mold your group's identity to include them. Be open minded to potential partnerships with local churches, schools, business organizations. They're community members too. Even if you don't always see eye-to-eye, part of being a neighborhood is learning how to move into the future together.

6) **Believe that people desire to make a difference.** The origins of the environmental movement are in being the Opposition. The movement grew up as nay-sayers to the status quo. In my work, I move beyond that Resistance role, into creation and testing of new ways, new lifestyles. It's often tempting to fall to the old patterns of "no one wants to change." But as leaders in a new way, we must constantly remind ourselves to believe in our power to make a difference. We must first believe it in order to do it. Even moreso, we must believe that people *want* to make a difference – they simply don't know how.

7) **Provide a Place.** Everyone craves a Place – a place to call their own, a sense of home, a sense of belonging, a place to contribute. Provide a safe and homey venue where people feel free to laugh and be themselves, to air their frustrations, and to work through challenges honestly. Provide a gathering place to share positive resources and solutions. Make the group meetings a place for people to practice walking their talk by separating trash, Reusing displays, being conscious of wasted handouts and other excess. Provide an outlet for people's desire to act. Provide activities which both get something accomplished and build a closer connection between neighbors. Think of it like setting a table for guests. As leader, you roll out the tablecloth on the buffet. Allow your membership to bring the dishes to create the feast.

8) **Tell 'em, and tell 'em again.** In growing your group, publicity is huge. There is plenty of free publicity available, and plenty of free online advice in how to get it. Learn the fine art of meeting press deadlines for community newspapers. Get friendly with your local editor. Discover the local bulletin boards and coffee shops where you can put out flyers. Understand that environmental publicity is much more than getting people to a meeting. Every time someone browses your flyer, every time you get a paragraph into a calendar section, every time you get an article published, you're telling the entire readership that positive environmental solutions exist, that they're workable, and that they're alive right here in their hometown.

9) **Let it grow.** Understand the lifecycle of an organization. When we first began the homeschool network, veterans told me it took about two years to get a network running really well. In that first year, there were many weeks when only one or two families showed up. It did in fact take a good two years before the group was up and running smoothly. Similarly for the first months of the Environmental Change-Makers. Schedule speakers who will still go on (and won't take it personally) if only 5 people show up for a meeting. On the other end of the spectrum, as your group grows and matures, practice letting go. Depart from the corporate model of bigger = better. Think "field of wildflowers" rather than "lone redwood." Rather than going massive and regional, cultivate new seedlings by mentoring local organizations in your neighboring neighborhoods.

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## RESOURCES:

*Superbia: 31 Ways to Create Sustainable Neighborhoods*, Dan Chiras and Dave Wann - practical tips for transforming our urban neighborhoods

*Wishcraft*, Barbara Sher - the power of positive focus, and how to attract resources

[www.EnviroChangeMakers.org](http://www.EnviroChangeMakers.org) – a working example of a neighborhood environmental organization

[www.LegacyLA.net](http://www.LegacyLA.net) - articles and handouts and books about environmental solutions

Joanne Poyourow is the co-founder of the Westchester/Los Angeles area group the Environmental Change-Makers. She is the author of the visionary book *Legacy: A Story of Hope for a Time of Environmental Crisis* which illustrates real environmental solutions through an inspiring story of grassroots activists. For seven years, Joanne mentored community service projects in Southern California and along the eastern seaboard. She is also a co-founder of the Culver-Westchester Homeschool Network. Her website [www.LegacyLA.net](http://www.LegacyLA.net) includes extensive resources for community-building and grassroots environmental action.

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