

# Every day is Earth Day for Madison entrepreneur

By Debra Illingworth Greene  
for Neighbors



Debra Greene

Saving the earth is everybody's business. But for Sonya Newenhouse, it is *literally* her business. She started Madison Environmental Group, Inc. in 1999, soon after receiving her Ph.D. from the Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies at UW-Madison. "I wanted to work in the sustainability field but it was so new there wasn't a market," Sonya recalls. "I basically took my dissertation and created an interdisciplinary environmental consulting firm. Rather than being engineering focused or conservation focused, we pull disciplines together such as business, engineering, design, sociology and

communications to find holistic, innovative solutions that are practical for businesses and the community."

Sonya credits her parents for her dual interests in business and the environment. They were entrepreneurs and immigrants, who "were always very conservation-minded, resourceful and frugal. They bought an abandoned farm in Richland County on the day I was born. I grew up in the suburbs of Chicago, but I spent every weekend at the farm."

Along with heading up Madison Environmental Group, Inc., Sonya is president of Community Car ([www.communitycar.com](http://www.communitycar.com)). The car-sharing organization was started in 2003, growing out of research done by Sonya's firm. Today, more than 1,300 members share access to a fleet of 19 cars located in reserved parking spots



around town.

Sonya started Community Car after realizing that approximately 30 percent of greenhouse gasses come from transportation. More recently, she learned that even more greenhouse gasses – approximately 40 percent – come from buildings, which inspired Sonya's latest project: NewenHouse.

"I was at a conference on passive houses in 2009 and the keynote speaker, from Austria, said that if we as a society need to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions 80 percent by 2050, we need to build every building today 80 percent more efficiently," she says. "I realized we can't wait. There are other aspects where incremental change is fine, but in buildings we need to leapfrog. NewenHouse will be an example of how we can leapfrog in the residential market."

NewenHouse, to be launched in 2012, is a series of super-insulated, sustainable, small kit homes. "We'll sell the plans and specialty materials that make it super-insulated, like the windows and doors," Sonya says. "It's not a pre-fab home – it's built on-site using a contractor."

Initially, three models will be available: a one-bedroom, 600-square-foot home; a two-bedroom, 800-square-foot home; and a three-bedroom, 1,000-square-foot home. All the homes come with a detached porch/storage shed and root cellar option.

Due to the insulation, super-efficient

windows and airtight seal, "the homes will be so well-insulated they won't need a fur-

An open house is held at the NewenHouse prototype the fourth Friday of each month, 3 to 5 p.m. And on Earth Day – April 22 – a celebration will be held.

nace even in Wisconsin winters," Sonya says. "The home needs only 2,000 watts to heat it – the equivalent of two hairdryers."

What about air quality in such a tight home? "A heat recovery ventilation unit will bring fresh air into every room and exhaust air from the kitchen and bathroom," Sonya explains. "For summer the windows are placed for natural ventilation." In addition, all the finishes inside the home will be "people-friendly."

The cost of the home is not yet available, but "we're trying to offer homes at an attainable price point," Sonya says.

According to Sonya, the NewenHouse project is very aligned with her original purpose of starting Madison Environmental Group: "Reducing our ecological footprint in an elegant and efficient way. With the reduced house size, you can have a higher-quality home. For me it's not just about energy. It's about reducing our whole footprint. If you have fewer rooms, you need fewer TVs, fewer sofas. I wanted to intersect the green building movement, the small home movement and the sustainable lifestyle movement. It's designed for green living."

The NewenHouse prototype is currently under construction in Viroqua; Sonya and her husband will move in this summer. (Sonya splits her time between Viroqua, where her husband works for Organic Valley, and Madison, where her firm's office is located.) An open house is held the fourth Friday of each month, 3 to 5 p.m. And on Earth Day – April 22 – a celebration will be held. Go to [www.madisonenvironmental.com](http://www.madisonenvironmental.com) for more information and directions. ■

## Neighbors SUMMER FUN GUIDE AND PLANNER 2011



On **Friday, May 6**, Neighbors will have an expanded issue and include the "Summer Fun Guide". It will include a calendar of fun events to plan for throughout the summer. The Summer Fun Guide and Planner will also include a comprehensive list of activities



to keep adults, kids and families busy throughout the summer months.

If your business can help keep families active this summer, you will want to reserve your space in this very special section now by contacting **Sharon Walsvik at (608) 252-6247, [swalsvik@madison.com](mailto:swalsvik@madison.com)** or **Debbie Lichtfeld at (608) 252-6264, [dlichtfeld@madison.com](mailto:dlichtfeld@madison.com)**.

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- Summer Learning