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## Sonya Newenhouse

Stepping lightly on the earth

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# Sonya Newenhouse: Stepping lightly on the earth

By Jackie Bradley

**S**onya Newenhouse views the world through green-colored glasses. She lives, eats, breathes, builds and even dates green.

## Respecting the earth; renovating the barn

The energetic environmental entrepreneur says she grew up respecting the environment. "The day I was born, my father bought a farm near Lone Rock where we

spent weekends. That influence taught me to appreciate renovation and the environment," says Newenhouse, owner and president of Madison Environmental Group, a consulting firm, and founder and president of Community Car, a car-sharing organization.

"My family always had a project in the mill," recalls Newenhouse. "The renovated barn on our 'Merry Farm of Gotham' now features a hayloft-turned-dance floor and rooms to rent to tourists."

## It began with tomatoes

While growing up in the Chicago suburbs, Newenhouse ventured into the world of entrepreneurship when she was 10 years old by selling home-grown tomatoes. "In college I had a car pool business with three riders who paid me \$3.00 a week," she says. "Inspired by a college real estate class, I used my savings to purchase my first house when I was 24 years old and working on my PhD at the UW."



## GO GREEN

[www.enact.org](http://www.enact.org) EnAct, a free program established by Madison Environmental Group to help people learn ways to reduce their impact on the environment and save approximately \$300 a year per household.

[www.communitycar.com](http://www.communitycar.com) A car sharing organization based in Madison.

[www.madisonenvironmental.com](http://www.madisonenvironmental.com) Madison Environmental Group, the consulting firm founded by Sonya Newenhouse.

[www.restoredane.org](http://www.restoredane.org) Madison's Habitat Restore.

Newenhouse admits she's a born adventurer. "When I was four years old, I traveled to Finland alone to visit my grandmother. I visited India when I was 14, took dance there, and didn't flinch at wandering the streets of New Delhi alone," she says.

Today, the 39-year-old visionary translates her integrated focus on the environment into a successful and growing business. "My underlying approach to work is listen, examine and observe," says Newenhouse, who has an undergraduate degree in business from Michigan State University.

When she founded Madison Environmental Group in 1999, Newenhouse and one employee ran the business that emphasized recycling and land use. "My integrative approach to business incorporates the triangle of methods; ecology, economy and sociology," she says. "For example you can have a good idea, but if it is too pricy it won't go forward."

### Divorcing the car

Recognizing the impact of transportation issues on the environment, in 2003 Newenhouse launched Community Car, a progressive environmentally friendly approach to transportation. Community Car provides cars by the hour to individuals and organizations. Members share access to a fleet of fuel-efficient cars located in reserved parking spots throughout Madison.

"Reducing driving is the single most important action an individual can take to improve the environment," says Newenhouse. "One mile driven equals one pound of CO2 emitted into the air. If everyone in Dane County chose to eliminate a 20-mile trip each week, that would have a huge impact on our climate and air quality.

"I divorced my own car," says Newenhouse. Since the "split" she stays fit by biking to work from her near east side home and then sprinting up and down two flights of stairs (43 steps) at work.

### Major move

Newenhouse reached a milestone in July, 2003, when she purchased the 25 Pinckney Street building where she relocated Madison Environmental Group. "I followed in my dad's footsteps when I made that move because he also owned the building that housed one of his two businesses," she says.

On the third floor, above L'Etoile Restaurant, Newenhouse and her staff of 10 practice, preach and teach all things green. The new office space reflects resourceful recycling including tables made from doors discarded during the current Capitol West renovation of Meriter Hospital. Purchasing light and bathroom fixtures from Habitat Restore, a bountiful retail source for used building supplies, meant further savings during the renovation of the 2200-square-foot space.

"We promote being resourceful and combining used and new materials to create beautiful interior spaces," says Newenhouse. "But it is important to avoid clutter. Simply beautiful is important and more affordable as well."

### Building green

"It was a natural evolution in 2004 when we added green building services," says Newenhouse. "Green buildings minimize their impact on the environment and last a long time."

Living green includes many facets. "It's not only design, but employing environmentally friendly building practices, including energy and building material issues. Equally important is how people live in, manage and get to and from the building," she says.

Considering green building projects, Newenhouse says Randy Alexander's Capitol West project represents an excellent example. "Capitol West is the largest project of its kind in downtown Madison and one of the most innovative," says Newenhouse, the project's green consultant.

One phase, the Main Street Townhouses, reflects the ultimate in creative urban infill according to Newenhouse. "Ten three-story

townhouses will create a living facade—a beautiful living space—that hides an existing three-story parking structure. This is smart design and efficient building in the city," she says. Once the townhouses are occupied, Madison Environmental Group will provide tools for condo residents to live green including finding ways to help them drive less.

Fourteen feet deep and 24 feet wide, the townhouses

offer approximately 1,400 square feet of living space and a fourth floor roof deck according to Tom Miller, project manager. "Sonya has been a strong proponent of the most efficient use of green design," he says.

Currently, with a waste-reduction grant from the Department of Natural Resources, research has begun on the feasibility of launching a Full Circle Furniture business including an interior design service. "Using discarded building supplies, we will create new furniture such as tables and beds made from second-hand doors," says Newenhouse. "Madison Children's Museum is donating door storage and design studio space in their new building."

### Mr. Wright

On weekends, Newenhouse spends time with her boyfriend, Cecil Wright. Car-free dating presents no problem; there's a bus to Viroqua where Wright lives. Wright, an Organic Valley senior management team member, enjoys his own earth-friendly niche with the largest farmer-owned organic food cooperative in the nation.

While Newenhouse says she is passionate about her work, she also enjoys socializing. "I love to throw parties at the farm, including a cider-making party in the fall," she says. "A particularly memorable and favorite farm event was a bash my family had at the farm to celebrate my PhD. My sister, Astrid, wrote a song for me about garbage because that was basically my major," jokes Newenhouse, who also has a brother, Yan.

"I love my work. It feels like a hobby. My business is financially successful and revenue continues to grow," says Newenhouse. Savoring life's whole enchilada, she says it's easy being green.



Jackie Bradley is a Madison-based freelance writer.