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## Our 'Green' Hall of Fame

*Five local eco-activists have been working to make Oak Park—and our planet—a better place to live*

**By DEB QUANTOCK MCCAREY**

If we were to start a Green Hall of Fame, the potential list of local inductees would be staggering. As a drop in the proverbial bucket, we decided to start with five individuals who have lived their commitment to personal and public "greening" through their work and community involvement. Instead of prizes, we offer these profiles and a perennial pat on the back. And the "winners" are ...

### **Speaking out against garbage**

*Jim Slama, wants people to "individually take more initiative to be green in their own lives."  
Photo by Frank Pinc*

It was Jim Slama's grass roots volunteerism, plus his significant reporting in Conscious Choice The Journal of Ecology and Natural Living, that led, in 1996, to the formation of Sustain, an environmental public interest group and the shutting down of the Northwest Incinerator in Chicago. Next, Slama and Sustain teamed with the Organic Trade Association to develop the Keep "Organic" Organic campaign. The organization played a key role in convincing the USDA to disallow food which was irradiated, genetically engineered, or grown in sewage sludge to be labeled as organic. They gained momentum by creating a free trade, organic food system in the Midwest called FamilyFarmed.org. In 2005, 2006, and 2007 the FamilyFarmed.org EXPO drew media attention and thousands of attendees.

In recent years the 46-year-old Oak Parker's firm has played a key role in helping to pass the Illinois Food, Farms, and Jobs Act. As the publisher of Conscious Choice Magazine, Slama was recognized eight times by Utne Magazine as a member of the "Best of the Alternative Press." Personal kudos include designation as one of Crain's Chicago Business "Forty under Forty" leading business and civic leaders. In 2005 Slama received the Chicago Tribune Good Eating Award for contributions to the Chicago food and beverage world. FamilyFarmed.org was recently given the first annual Yahoo Green Award for its contributions in linking consumers with local and organic food.

"Oak Park is a very progressive community doing great things on the environmental side, but what I would really like to see here are people individually taking more initiative to be green in their own lives," Slama says. "So whether it be buying locally grown, organic food, or cutting their energy consumption so they are not contributing so much to climate change, or maybe using the el more, or purchasing a fuel efficient vehicle such as the Prius-those are all significant things anyone can do."

### **A smaller footprint**

*For Marge Gockel, conserving energy is a lifestyle.  
Photo by Josh Hawkins*

About 30 years ago, when Marge Gockel was the mother of young children, she decided to start a farmers' market here. Carla Lind had the same idea, so the women went to the village separately and soon became a team.

"I always knew urban areas could support a farmers' market," says the 73-year-old who had previously lived in Ann Arbor, Mich. "The hard part back then was finding farmers and letting them know that Oak Park would be a place where they could sell their produce. Now, of course, the opposite is the problem. We have about 35 vendors and have to turn people away."

Initially, when Gockel and Lind asked for space in the enclosed Lake Street pedestrian mall, the village said no. However, they regrouped and requested and got North Boulevard between East Avenue and Euclid. It worked at first, but within two years, the Oak Park Farmers' Market was big enough to fill a parking lot, so they landed at Pilgrim Congregational Church, its seasonal home still today.

"It did take a long time to find organic growers though," Gockel recalls. "Now all of the meat purveyors are organic, maybe some of the cheese people are, and at least four or five vegetable growers are organic, so it has really grown from the beginning when we really had to struggle to find them."

For Gockel, conserving energy is a lifestyle. She tries to walk most everywhere, rarely throws away food, and reuses cottage cheese, yogurt and cream cheese containers as well as plastic bags at home and at the grocery store. She also tries to use fans instead of air-conditioning, has purchased fluorescent light bulbs and is planning to conserve energy by plugging surge protectors into home outlets.

"Buying organic just leaves a smaller footprint on the earth in terms of fertilizer, and what you feed your family," Gockel says, "because they have no herbicides, pesticides and artificial fertilizers that indeed may be harmful for your long-term health."

## **Stopping the pipe**

*green: Julie Samuels' environmental advocacy has stretched from stopping incinerators and pesticide usage to running for lieutenant governor on the Green Party ticket last fall.*

*Photo by Frank Pinc*

Community activist Julie Samuels, 63, believes everybody must consider how what they are doing and observing around them impacts the planet-and if it's unjust, take action.

"Environmentally speaking, I believe everything in life is connected," says Samuels, a Community Outreach Coordinator for the Openlands Project since 1994. "When you kill trees or tear down perfectly good old buildings to create new ones, there is all that waste. Then, when you build a big multi-use complex and invite people who have three cars to live in luxury condos, it is less safe for people to bicycle on the streets. One strand always leads to another."

Samuel's tapestry of community involvement is intricate. Over time she has joined with groups to shut down incinerators, spoken out against rampant pesticide usage (a continuing cause for her) and advocated for trees. She also sat on several Oak Park commissions and, with her husband, Bruce, founded Citizen's for Appropriate Transportation (opposing the proposed I-290 Corridor expansion). Moreover, she co-founded such groups as The Oak Park Food Co-op; Oak Park Women's Exchange; Waste Ideas Network (WIN); Chicago's Austin Anti-Asthma Advocates (AAAA); Businesses and Residents United to Serve Harrison St. (BRUSH); The Village Citizens' Alliance (VCA); and The New Leadership Coalition (NLC). Recently, Samuels helped organize the South East Oak Park Community Organization (SEOPCO) in reaction to the major environmental clean up of Barrie Park. She has also received numerous commendations for her volunteer work and earlier this year ran for lieutenant governor on the Green Party ticket.

"I don't think of myself as a green person, but more of an organizer and activist who understands the relationship between and consequences of actions," Samuels says. "The latest example of this is the controversy over cutting down old trees to

make room for soccer fields in four parks.

"From the point of view of the people who want the soccer fields, they are not thinking about what it means to destroy the trees and dig up the soil, or about the subsequent pesticide usage on the fields to eliminate the dandelions."

### **Dandelion queen**

*Being greener: Barbara Mullarkey wants Oak Park to pass a tree preservation ordinance.  
Photo by Josh Hawkins*

When Barbara Alexander Mullarkey became a food columnist for Wednesday Journal in 1980, her writings became the laboratory and springboard for her home-grown environmentalism.

It started in 1987 when a family kitten got out and came back immobilized on one side. Was the cat's illness related to the recent spraying of pesticides on the neighbor's lawn, she wondered?

Next, a friend claimed her Yorkshire terrier's illness and death was attributed to their walking in Mills Park post-pesticide sprayings.

Multiple visits to the Oak Park Environment and Energy Commission resulted in the Right to Know Ordinance, and the Mother Earth Network (MEN), a grassroots group dedicated to convincing the village to ban the private and public use of poisons on lawns. An offshoot of that group was the Oak Park Environmental Network (OPEN).

In the early '90s, as she bicycled around town, Mullarkey noticed an abundance of prairie gardens and wrote about them in her weekly column.

"I thought, this is a great way to stop waste, use less water, and be good to the birds and the butterflies," Mullarkey, 71, recalls. "A local television reporter often featured my prairie garden on the news and called me the Dandelion Queen because I included them in my prairie garden-and still do."

Even though Mullarkey ended her column in 1997, her words keep finding their way into the community forum. Most recently, she became involved with Citizen Tree Rescue to monitor and protest the village's ill-thought-out tree pruning and volcanic mulching practices as well as other local tree-related misdemeanors.

"I believe we have to have a tree preservation ordinance in Oak Park like they do in Lake Forest, Park Ridge and Northbrook," Mullarkey says. "It would be great if the village would actually designate a tree preservation officer because then I wouldn't have to go up and down the streets of Oak Park to look at these trees and then always call somebody and tell them."

### **Promoting sustainability**

*Seven generations: Gary Cuneen created his nonprofit organization Seven Generations Ahead in 2001 to make the world a better place for his son.  
Photo by Frank Pinc*

When Gary Cuneen's son was 4 years old, Cuneen daydreamed about his boy's future. At age 40, would he ask his Dad if he had foreseen the environmental crisis coming, and if so, what did he do about it?

In that moment, Cuneen's worldview shifted, and he began preparing to launch Seven Generations Ahead, an advocacy, education and consulting business that would address global issues on a local level. In addition to conducting educational seminars on various green topics, Cuneen's company is preparing to distribute a green home remodeling CD called

"Remodel Green."

In Oak Park, his group has linked the village with the foundation that provided the \$100,000 green building design grant for the Public Works facility, and teamed with Village President David Pope and the Environment and Energy Commission to draft ordinance language that would essentially put LEED green building development on the menu of options as a compensating benefit on planned unit developments.

In the past four years, Cuneen, 46, has connected numerous organic farmers with the Oak Park Farmers' Market, and has created multiple community-supported agriculture, farm-direct buying hubs, including 13 in Oak Park. What's more, Seven Generations Ahead has developed a Fresh from the Farm school-based healthy eating program that stages on-the-farm field trips and school-based show-and-tells in District 97 classrooms with organic farmers.

This coming school year, after a successful pilot program in two elementary schools, all 10 elementary schools will receive healthy lunches produced by the Oak Park and River Forest High School food service, thanks partly to the efforts of Seven Generations Ahead.

"Environmentalism has changed," says Cuneen. "Activism, in the broadest sense of the word, yes, but nowadays many people in this field understand that caring for the environment and engaging in community development are not antagonistic ventures. In fact, growth is good, but it has to be growth that is building up and not degrading the environment. The new environmentalism partners between community and business and government, so the playing field has shifted a bit."

## Earth watch

We've given you our first WJ "Green Team" of outstanding Oak Park environmentalists. With their input, here are five honorable mentions:

- **Amy Little** is on the Environment and Energy Commission and goes everywhere on her bicycle or by foot. She lives her commitment and really works hard at sharing it; her husband, **Lee Ravenscroft**, is the founder of the Working Bikes Cooperative which recovers landfill-bound bicycles and returns them to working condition. He teaches inner-city kids how to repair them. Then they sell the bikes to Chicagoans from their storefront, which in turn funds the shipment of bicycles and parts to developing countries.
- Village President **David Pope** certainly has a great opportunity to make Oak Park into a model "green" community, and he has started to take some initiatives in that direction (see Viewpoints for his sustainable village vision).
- **Peggy Studney**, who has lived just north of the Eisenhower Expressway for its entire existence, has long been pro-actively concerned about litter and facilitated the idea of planting trees next to the fence along the Eisenhower to lessen the impact of the highway. She has also helped start the corner parkway garden program.
- **Mike Iversen** recently presented a series at the public library on turning your block green. He understands the environmental fabric and how it relates to community development and maintenance.

-Deb Quantock McCarey