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Riverside man inspires environmentalism in neighbors by helping them 'move from interest to action'

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By DAVID DANELSKI
The Press-Enterprise

Some environmental activists go to sea to block commercial whalers or lobby Congress to create national parks.

But Justin Scott-Coe sees ways to improve the planet every time he takes a stroll near his home in Riverside's Wood Streets, an older neighborhood just west of downtown Riverside.

He sees water wasted on lawns and lush, tropical landscaping when drought-tolerant native plants would do. He notices incandescent light bulbs that hog electricity when miserly fluorescents are readily available. And he walks past yards that could grow vegetables, providing fresh food and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

But thanks to the volunteer community group co-founded by Scott-Coe and six others, many of his neighbors have taken steps this year toward what he calls more sustainable living.

Riverside Councilman Mike Gardner, who rolls through the neighborhood daily on his eco-friendly Segway, said he's already seeing a difference, with more drought-tolerant landscapes and less wasted irrigation water running into storm drains.

Scott-Coe, 35, blushed and said Gardner gave him too much credit.

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Mark Zaleski / The Press-Enterprise
Environmental activist Justin Scott-Coe, who lives in Riverside's Wood Streets neighborhood, wants a change toward more sustainable living.

The group, called the Wood Streets Green Team, is just helping people do what they want to do to help the planet, he said.

"There is a lot of interest," he said during an interview at a Riverside demonstration garden in Casa Blanca that features drought-tolerant plants. "But there is not much organizing to help people move from interest to action."

Scott-Coe is a former high school and community college English teacher who now works as a public affairs specialist for the Monte Vista Water District, based in Montclair. He also taught English in the late 1990s as a Peace Corp volunteer in the Ukraine, where he worked with people who couldn't afford to waste the Earth's resources.

"It's our job to live sustainably on this Earth and do as little harm as possible," he said.

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The Kathleen M. Gonzales memorial garden in Casa Blanca shows water efficiency in desert landscaping.

Inspiration to form the Green Team came last year as Scott-Coe, a member of Riverside's utility board, attended a city leadership academy that taught him the skills he needed to put the group together.

The Green Team came together in a January meeting in Scott-Coe's living room.

He also obtained a $600 grant from the city's Department of Housing and Neighborhoods, which "was just what we needed to get the program off the ground."

The money covered the cost of postcards to advertise the meetings and provide refreshments for the group's first public gathering in April at Riverside City College. About 40 people showed up. They broke into groups that focused on energy efficiency, water-wise landscapes, vegetable gardening, water quality, transportation and recycling.

Team members surveyed what the participants wanted to accomplish. Workshops in living rooms followed.

For one gathering, for example, the group invited city utility officials, who described subsidies and rebates Riverside offers for home energy-efficiency projects such as installing solar panels or adding weatherstripping. They also explained a special electrical metering system that offers resident less costly power during off-peak hours.

Another workshop tackled vegetable gardening and backyard composting. The next one, scheduled for Oct. 18, will be about using native plants to create water-efficient landscapes.

Scott-Coe also set up a social-networking Web site (woodstreetsgreenteam.ning.com) that tracks the workshops and other events, lists useful Internet sites and allows visitors to share tips and ideas. In one recent chat thread, members traded ideas about vacant lots in the neighborhood that would be good candidates for a community garden.

His brand of micro-activism appears to be spreading. Scott-Coe has been approached by Riverside residents wanting to establish similar groups downtown, around the Magnolia Center and in neighborhoods near UC Riverside.

Scott-Coe acknowledged he doesn't always practice what he preaches. Among his full-time job, serving on the boards of several city and community groups, and working on his English doctoral dissertation, he hasn't found time to put in his own vegetable garden and replant his yard with drought-tolerant landscaping.

"I've got a lot of things to do myself," he said. "I formed this group in part to embarrass myself to do what I should do."

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JUSTIN SCOTT-COE

Age: 35

Residence: Riverside

Occupation: Public affairs specialist for Monte Vista Water District

Passion: Promoting conservation at the grass-roots level

Information: woodstreetsgreenteam.ning.com