

Philanthropy Corner “Making Environmentalism and Nonprofits Sexy”
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California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger is using his fame to raise awareness about environmental issues – so are a group of local women environmentalists. Hoping to give the environmental movement the momentum it needs to have growing, widespread appeal, to raise consciousness and call to action, Schwarzenegger is urging environmentalist to make their cause sexier in order to make going green cool and tree hugging hip. A group of twelve local female environmentalists have followed his advice by shedding their clothes to produce a charity calendar inspired by the British movie “Calendar Girls” to raise money for a local nonprofit environmental organization. All 500 copies featuring female artists, activists, attorneys, restaurant owners, hoteliers, realtors, and a former politician and educator have already been sold. Proceeds of the calendar sales are going to Green Living & Energy Education (GLEE) to start a community garden.

Our local ‘calendar girls’ believe protecting the environment of the Florida Keys is of utmost importance. Our 202 mile-long island chain is part of the only coral reef system in North America and the third largest barrier reef in the world. Our environment and coral reefs are being threatened by over development, pollution, over fishing, increasing tourism, and climate change. Numerous threatened and endangered species depend upon the habitats of the Florida Keys, and fishery and tourism industries are dependent upon the marine ecosystem to provide commercial and recreational value.

Here in the Keys there is an army of people and a number of nonprofit organizations working to protect our natural resources and environment. There are 26 environmental organizations and agencies on the Community Foundation’s website working up and down the Keys to preserve our coral reefs, animal and plant habitats who are engaged in conservation initiatives, land preservation, environmental stewardship and awareness, education, and ecosystem restoration. GLEE may be one of the newest nonprofits whose mission is to promote sustainable actions through education about renewable energy and conservation. Another newly formed nonprofit, the Florida Keys Hydropower Corporation, is working on advancing hydropower in the Florida Keys. These two organizations have joined other environmentally-focused organizations with state and national connections such as The Nature Conservancy, Audubon Society and Mote Marine Laboratory. They complement long standing organizations such as Reef Relief, the Key West Botanical Garden Society, Last Stand and the Key West Garden Club, to name a few, who have been engaged in protecting the quality of life in the Keys for decades.

Spearheaded by individual activists who have a passion for environmental activism, these organizations are working hand in hand with our local, state, and national governments, and businesses. My fellow columnist Chris Belland is one example of an individual activist who was the inspiration behind the Love Your Island campaign to get Key West cleaner and greener by enlisting the membership of the Key West Chamber of Commerce. And then there are those individuals who are no longer with us but whose efforts are being carried forward by a new generation of activists. Like Jim McLernan who helped form Last Stand and seeded an endowment at the Community Foundation to sustain its work, and “Mick” Putney who was active with Last Stand and the Key Deer Protection Alliance where he donated more than 2,000 hours of volunteer service at the National Key Deer Refuge, and former Key West Commissioner Merili McCoy who founded the Tree Commission, and many other people in our community who were committed to environmental causes.

These activists and environmental groups have experienced some victories to minimize our carbon footprint by slowing down the eradication of habitats of endangered species, saving the pines at Fort Zachary Taylor, elevating the consciousness about recycling, and pressuring local and state governments to impose regulations on development. But we still have a long way to go in this “green fight”, particularly in recycling. Monroe County ranked 59th out of 67 counties in Florida for recycling in 2007, behind two other counties of similar size, Putnam and Flagler ranking 20th and 32nd, respectively.

Most of the people I interviewed for this article believe there is a high degree of interest in environmental issues in our community. A government representative I spoke with agreed that everybody likes the idea until it hits the pocketbook, noting the commitment is not there to make the necessary changes and finance the infrastructure to be a green community. Green communities are formed by a mosaic of initiatives that involve public transportation and mobility without cars, density and growth boundaries, land and resource conservation, and curbside recycling programs. The solution to get people enthusiastic about funding infrastructure and environmental causes is the same according to Governor Schwarzenegger. His advice to his colleagues at the National Governors Conference is “to come up with a sexier word than infrastructure.” The nonprofit sector has been trying for years to get funding for administrative overhead and infrastructure. If it works for the environment and infrastructure needs of government, perhaps it will work for the nonprofit sector as well. We should take off our hats in honor of those who took off their clothes in the spirit of protecting our environment for the benefit of all.