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Enviro-visionary

Sonya Newenhouse has green dreams for Madison

By Tenaya Darlington

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At the new office of the Madison Environmental Group, located above L'Etoile on the Capitol Square, there's a bathroom scale in the kitchenette. You might guess everyone there was on a diet after eating so many of Odessa Piper's croissants, but you'd be wrong.

"It's to weigh compost," says Sonya Newenhouse, the consulting firm's trend-setting president. She opens a cabinet under the sink, points to a bucket full of coffee grounds and banana peels and says, "We weigh everything — our recycling, our trash — in order to track it. We want to have a climate-neutral office."

Then she crosses the room in a pair of witchy black boots and promptly empties the compost into a worm bin. She dusts off her hands, returns the bucket below the sink and heads back to her desk. On the wall, a small laminated card reads, "Paint: Virtually VOC free, \$16/gallon."

Everything around Newenhouse's office has a label of origin, adding a strange, museum-like quality to the bright, airy rooms where her handful of staffers work quietly at their computers. "St. Vincent de Paul, \$35 for four" reads a tag on a set of chairs.

"Look," says Newenhouse, throwing open the bathroom door, "I love this! It's a Kohler sink I got for \$15."

At the end of the workday, you might see Newenhouse stooped over the curb in her black wool coat, sorting through trash for salvageable office supplies before heading across the Square for a beer at Genna's, her favorite bar. "I'm frugal, and at Genna's you can still get a beer for \$1.80," she exclaims.

Like the secondhand office furniture, it's the sort of detail that illustrates how Newenhouse has launched three companies, all of which slant toward greening Madison. In the past five years, she's opened her own consulting agency (Madison Environmental Group); set up the city's first car-sharing program, Community Car (www.communitycar.com), in which members share a fleet of high-gas-mileage vehicles located in reserved parking spots around the city; and purchased the Crescent Building, 25 N. Pinckney St., from L'Etoile's Odessa Piper to convert the top floor into her own green office space. (In the process, L'Etoile is getting a facelift and a totally revamped cafe space on the ground floor.)

At 37, Newenhouse is one of Madison's emerging civic visionaries, a dreamer and a doer who succeeds, she says, by starting businesses where people like to work. "I've never taken out an ad; people just seek me out for jobs."

Granted, her businesses are still fledglings (gross revenue for Madison Environmental Group was a modest \$250,000 in 2003, though it has been growing by 20% a year), but her clients include movers like Alliant Energy, J.H. Findorff & Son, the city of Madison, Overture Development Corp., Madison Gas and Electric, the University of Wisconsin and the Department of Natural Resources. And when you meet Newenhouse, you sense that she's a different kind of businesswoman altogether. Petite yet powerful. Fiercely driven yet hardly fanatical, even though she's burning to launch company #4, a green roofing project.

Who is this wonder woman, this radical achiever? And how, sans trust fund, sans Porsche and golf clubs, has she managed to wrap Madison around her pinkie and buddy up to some of the city's biggest players?

Newenhouse's network

Newenhouse starts every morning at Ancora Coffee on King Street. "I call it Conference Room A," she says. "Everyone goes there. Barbara Lawton goes there every day. John Nichols is there every day. I'm there from 8 a.m. to 9 a.m., just talking to people, reading the paper."

So on a snowy Thursday in January, I show up to observe.

Newenhouse is there early, flipping through the *Wisconsin State Journal* at the bar across from her regular seatmate, a guy named Jeff whose green flannel shirt sports a pocket patch from the DNR.

"Every morning Jeff reads the London *Financial Times* and tells me what's up," says Sonya, adjusting her rectangular black glasses. Then she swivels in her seat and names every person in the room.

At 7:25 a.m., a bundled figure flops down beside her and opens a binder to show Newenhouse minutes from a Clean Air Coalition meeting. Newenhouse nods, her dark pageboy swinging in line with her chin. She listens intently, flips through some notes, then sips the last of her coffee and prepares to head out. Despite the deep snow, she unlocks her bike — an old blue 10-speed with nicked paint and a weathered wicker basket (she's owned it since she was 11) — and marches toward the Madison Club.

There's something Elvira Gulch about her, mixed with schoolgirl chic. Maybe it's her squared-off black boots and her plaid wool slacks. Or maybe it's her manner — a combination of firm determination and sprightly whimsy. "I just love alliteration," she'll croon, looking over a press release. And in the next minute, her eyes narrowing: "I love deal making. I love bringing people together and closing the deal!"

At the Madison Club, Newenhouse locks up her bike; its beat-up frame, posed against the club's fancy façade, seems to amuse her. She prefers it to the used Honda Accord she sold after reading *Divorce Your Car*, a book that inspired her to launch Community Car last fall. The program, which is based on car-sharing groups in San Francisco and Portland, Ore., now has 50 members. For a monthly flat fee and an hourly surcharge, they have access to three (soon four) cars around the city, which can be reserved over the phone or via the Internet. (The cost, which includes insurance, gas

and maintenance, is low to create an incentive for car-sharing and, ultimately, reduce the environmental impact of vehicle emissions.)

Inside the Madison Club, where the gray suits swarm around trays of muffins, Newenhouse springs into action before the monthly Downtown Madison Inc. meeting gets under way. “Time to network,” she says. In the half hour before her next appointment, she manages to lay hands on most of Madison’s power elite, slipping them invites for the Community Car party she’s hosting at the Casbah tonight. “I’d love it if you could come,” she says to each in turn, offering a smile, a nod and a hand to their padded elbows.

This is Business 101 à la Newenhouse: Networking is everything. Always send thank you notes. Take cookies to meetings with clients. Read Willa Cather instead of Dale Carnegie. Lead by example. Never make people feel guilty.

“I’m not some whacko,” she says at one point. “There are people who keep their thermostats at 55. At night, I keep mine at 58.”

That mixture of idealism and practicality is a Newenhouse signature. She functions in the real world where business and environmentalism sometimes shake hands and become partners. In the last five years, she’s devised a Car-Free Challenge for the Bicycle Federation of Wisconsin and Madison Community Foundation; started a program of Environmental Action Teams, called EnAct, that promotes sustainable living through neighborhood and workplace meetings; and enabled J.H. Findorff & Son to recycle 55% of materials during construction of the Overture Center for the Arts.

Thanks to Newenhouse’s efforts, Overture contractors were able to recycle 1,970 tons of waste, cutting disposal fees by 30%.

A communal lunch

By 10 a.m., Newenhouse finally sits down at her desk. “I just need to chill,” she sighs. “It’s been a three-meeting morning.” Behind her, the wall of her small private office is painted an enlivening spring green — her favorite color — set off by a painting by local artist Charles Munch.

In the high-ceilinged room next to hers, Newenhouse’s six staffers move about their business. There’s Maureen Mahle, a twenty-something civil engineer who is handling the renovations of the Crescent Building. Her desk is surrounded by floor samples, pieces of rock. And there’s Nuria Hernández-Mora, who is busy typing up a proposal for a new park in the town of Menasha. All but one of Newenhouse’s staffers are women — not something Newenhouse intended, she says, but something she takes pride in just the same.

Jay Ferm, who Newenhouse hired last June to help her launch Community Car, calls Newenhouse “amazing.” He says, “Oftentimes creative people have a hard time delivering, but she’s a perfect balance. It’s really inspiring to work here.”

Hernández-Mora, who served as assistant director at 1000 Friends of Wisconsin before joining Madison Environmental Group a year and a half ago, loves the collaborative atmosphere that Newenhouse has fostered

among her employees. “Sonya is very hands-off now. You check in with her, obviously, but it only takes five minutes, and it amazes me that she always knows exactly what you’re talking about and can make suggestions, even though her mind is on a million things.”

At noon, the quiet office revs up for lunch, a communal event that takes place in the kitchenette. “Who wants a peanut butter and jelly sandwich?” Newenhouse calls out, pulling a loaf of bread from the sleek, eco-friendly fridge. She hauls out a bag of salad greens, some oranges and soon everyone is grouped around the table talking projects and personal lives.

It’s a scene that seems both natural and yet...quaint. How many offices lunch together? More important, how many employees would care to lunch with their boss? And how many bosses would take the time to toast their employees’ peanut butter sandwiches?

In five years, Newenhouse has never had an employee quit. Although no one is getting rich, it’s the sort of place where people value ambitious projects over high paychecks, and Newenhouse’s honesty creates kinship.

Her work relationships are built upon what she calls “a philosophy of transparency.” It starts with the kilowatt meter in the hall outside her office to illustrate, to everyone who passes, her commitment to conservation on the most personal level. Her transparency also extends to the company books, which she invites her employees to freely peruse.

“They can look and see what I spent on lunch. They can see how much money I make. And what they see is that I don’t make much more than them. I don’t believe in a big income gap.”

It’s a business philosophy she picked up from her Dutch immigrant father who, she remembers, took her to his own business meetings when she was a child. Her father, Henk Newenhouse, a third-generation socialist, fled Holland after the war and spent several years working for the U.N. before starting a business in Chicago to distribute educational films. He now lives on a farm in Gotham, Wis., where he volunteers as a liaison between the Richland County courts and community members.

Of Sonya, his youngest daughter, he says, “She always had an interest in business and what was socially right.” He raises his thick, white eyebrows, chuckling, “I take credit for her business sense, but not her interest in waste!”

Starting Young

Newenhouse says her commitment to the environment started young. “I remember when I was 11, buying a solar, back-to-the-land kind of magazine instead of *Seventeen*.” She traveled extensively as a teen and put in time at her father’s business, as well as her stepmother’s linen shop in Highland Park, Ill. “Every dinner conversation,” she recalls, “was about my parents’ businesses, so it’s always been in my blood, so to speak.”

After high school, Newenhouse went on to Michigan State to major in business with a minor in hotel and restaurant management. She came to

Madison to get her enviro degree and started working as an environmental analyst for Wisconsin Power & Light, developing a volunteer program that won three national awards and two state recognitions.

A year after completing her Ph.D., in '98, she launched Madison Environmental Group with one employee, a pack of business cards and her own furious gusto. Within 14 days, she had her first client, Alliant Energy, the corporate successor to WP&L.

Newenhouse makes it look easy. She works until 10 p.m. some weeknights, but still finds time to play ice hockey on Saturday mornings and meet with her knitting group on Wednesday nights. When it's pear season, she sets aside everything and bakes, bakes, bakes — filling her freezer with a stash of special pear cakes she doles out sparingly as gifts.

She is happily single — “I’m not without suitors,” she says at one point — and doesn’t mind that she rarely takes a vacation. “Living in Madison is like being on vacation,” she says. “I call my house Rutledge Street Retreat.”

Isn’t there one thing, I ask her, one thing that at all unnerves her? Isn’t there some tiny bee in her bright bonnet, some nagging cricket song that stirs her from sleep?

Okay, okay. There’s the fact that she lives on “the financial edge,” as she puts it. “But once you’re already on the edge,” she shrugs, “it can’t get any worse. I mean, what’s the worst that could happen to me? I’d sell my house and move in with a friend.”

She continues: “I bought a little house when I was 24 with 10 grand that I’d started saving at 14. I put down three grand and used seven to fix it up.” Ten years later, she sold the house and purchased the Crescent Building from Piper by refinancing her second house and arranging a land-contract to buy out Piper.

“You don’t need a lot of money to create security for yourself,” Newenhouse says. “That’s a message I’d really like to share. Just save and leverage your assets.”

Brainstorming the future

At 1 p.m., out of the blue, Newenhouse dials the number for Zane Williams, the esteemed Wisconsin photographer whose book *Doubletake* generated a flurry of media buzz last year. “Hi, Zane, this is Sonya Newenhouse,” she begins. “The façade is down on our building, and it looks really cool. I can’t afford to hire you, but if you’re documenting the Square, I just wanted to make you aware.” There’s a pause, then she adds sweetly, “You should come by. I’d make you a cup of hot chocolate!”

Are you friends with Zane? I ask her. She shakes her head, “He’s just someone I’ve met at functions.”

Indeed. Another network contact.

On a shelf in the corner of her office sit five binders full of business cards, which Newenhouse flips through with all the tenderness of someone reviewing a family album.

"My banker," she smiles. "Oh, look, here's Mayor Dave's former business card when he worked for 1000 Friends."

She includes many of these names among her mentors. "Some people are just my mentor for the day. They may not even know it," she says. "And I'm always looking for more. I want to meet Judith Faulkner of Epic Systems."

At 2 p.m., it's time for a brainstorming session. Newenhouse's staff roll their chairs into the center of the office and begin tossing out ideas for a new festival they'd like to launch on alternative transportation. Newenhouse nods excitedly and circulates a bowl of cookies.

Much of Newenhouse's job is brainstorming how to generate the kind of business that interests her. "Often, we'll get an idea, then figure out whom to pitch it to," she says.

Ask her about how to conserve energy downtown, and her mind begins to flutter. "Imagine," she says, "if there was a big barometer on the Square so that we could see when we're using the most power — like in July when everyone has their air-conditioning on. And, what if all the restaurants started hosting 'romantic nights' during that time, where they turned out their lights and only used candles?"

At 2:45 p.m., she closes her office door and calls her father to review revised floor plans for the building. She fingers a brochure on doorknobs and studies code requirements for restaurant entryways. Her office is neat, the desk free of clutter or decoration, except for a tiny plastic tree frog perched on her phone.

Then it's 4 p.m., time to head to the Casbah for the Community Car Party. Newenhouse spins into action. She's got her laptop, her business cards, a speech spinning in the back of her mind. With a giant satchel in the basket of her bike, she trundles off into the gathering darkness to play hostess and to spout, in that cheery way of hers, "Hello there, I'm Sonya Newenhouse."

I find Bruce Chevis mingling near the cash bar at the Casbah. Over the last few months, he's become something of a poster boy for Community Car and also one of Newenhouse's biggest champions. Since joining the car-sharing program, he's sold off two of his family's three vehicles in an effort to reduce emissions.

"I'm a green kinda person," says Chevis, who works for the DNR. "I want what's right for the world. Community Car is really the perfect program."

Home sweet home

At 7:40 p.m., Newenhouse starts home, pushing her bicycle across the ice to her house on the 1400 block of Rutledge, which she shares with two housemates, Andrew, an environmental lawyer, and Sture, a visiting professor in limnology from Sweden. In the kitchen, she's greeted by Andrew's dog, a husky-golden mix with one blue eye.

"I always make myself sit down to read the mail," Newenhouse says, kicking off her boots and slipping into a chair at her dining room table. On the walls, there are more Munch paintings; otherwise the house is spare, comfy but hardly posh.

After reading several postcards, she sets out to cook dinner, sautéed vegetables over rice. It's been a 13-hour day, and though she looks tired, she's cheerful and relaxed as she tosses garlic into a wok.

"Here's what Odessa taught me," she says, stirring the garlic with a wooden spoon. "If you don't want to burn your garlic, add a little water to the oil." She smiles, easily delighted. It's not hard to see how she and Piper get along. In fact, it seems only perfect that two hard-driving women, devoted to sustainability and social good, work above and below one another, the scent of bread fueling their engines.

Like Piper, Newenhouse cultivates an unequivocal graciousness that lays the foundation for all she does. "Here," she says on my way out, "take a cookie for the road."

For more information about Community Car, call 204-0000 or attend an information session at the Memorial Union on Tuesday, March 2, 5-6 pm or Wednesday, March 3, 12:30-1:30 pm.