

## Forces of Nature

Wright, Sonya Newenhouse, and  
global sustainability starts at home  
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Martha Busse



L-R: Molly Jahn, Carla Wright, and Sonya Newenhouse  
pictured at Wright's home near Cross Plains.



Molly Jahn, Carla  
Nancy Christy -

Laura Kearney photos by

**Value. Intention.  
Integrity. Give.  
Trust. Observe.**

**Learn. Evolve. Deliver. Impact. Respect.  
Beauty. Sustainable.**

These are words you'll hear when you speak with Madison's four eco-heroines--Molly Jahn, dean of University of Wisconsin--Madison's College of Agricultural and Life Sciences, who, less than a year into her tenure, helped land a \$125 million award from the Department of Energy to

investigate how bio-energy alternatives like cornstalks, native prairie grasses and forestry waste products can reduce our country's reliance on fossil fuels; Nancy Christy, a local food advocate with a global perspective who motivates her clients to think and eat sustainably; Sonya Newenhouse, the dreamer and doer whose firm works with businesses and individuals to help them realize the economic benefits of eco-friendly practices; and Carla Wright, DNR employee by day, offering businesses incentives to go greener than regulations require, and tireless 24/7 grassroots advocate for land conservation and organic agriculture--about what guides them. You'll also notice each squirm ever so slightly at being ordained an "eco-heroine."

They're too modest.

Even though this is Madison, we don't want to press the Earth Mother analogy here. But these are women who give birth to big ideas and nurture others, one convert at a time, providing the information people need to make informed decisions at their own pace.

Madison's eco-heroines are welcoming not daunting. They are powerful but not out to claim power. Instead, they are steadfastly, some of them quietly, and all of them gracefully working to make sure we recognize that the choices we make have consequences beyond our backyard.

It's easy being green when this theme is inextricably woven into your life, livelihood, and lifestyle. And there is a vibrant 21st-century synergy in the way our eco-heroines' environmental passions--energy, transportation, recycling, green building, sustainable agriculture, conservation, and climate change--overlap.

**The Rain Maker**



If you're dubious about how the dean of a college of ag could be an eco-heroine, consider this: "If you're interested in conservation, in protecting ecosystems in something like an unmanaged state, what goes on in the boundaries of those lands is really important," says Jahn. "Thinking about land use, we should be recognizing that how we manage agricultural lands will have an impact on neighboring lands, and vice versa."

Jahn is a plant geneticist whose research career focused on breeding disease resistance into vegetables so that the need for pesticides would be eliminated.

Today, she heads up a wide-ranging portfolio of twenty departments within the college, from production ag to natural resources to life sciences communication--all of them, she emphasizes, interconnected as well as connected to other arms of the university, and, critically, to communities beyond campus.

"Some of the biggest issues that face our society--for example, a safe and sustainable food supply--are squarely in this college's purview. Energy sourced from other than fossil fuels--at the center of lots of things this college does. Climate change will have huge impacts on both our natural resources and our production ag," notes Jahn. "Understanding the dynamics and potential responses is a way this college can contribute."

That \$125 million award from the Department of Energy for the Great Lakes Bioenergy Research Center is one such example of this land-grant college's work having impact in the real world.

An optimist by temperament and a pragmatist by years of intense scientific inquiry, Jahn stresses that part of sustainability is a healthy bottom line.

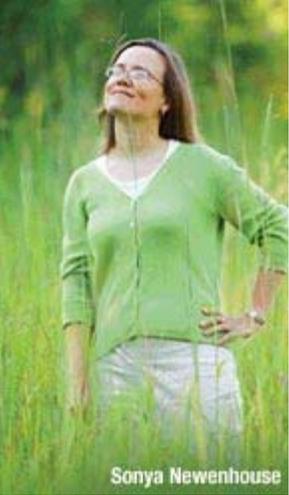
"We are excited about the entrepreneurial spirit we see here," she says, reflecting on her family's adopted home of Madison. "It's that understanding that something can be environmentally reasonable and good for humans, too."

### **The Meaningful Foodie**

Speaking of sustainable agriculture yet again ... "Our interest in local food at that time had to do with aesthetics, with having good food. There wasn't necessarily an environmental component," recalls Nancy Christy of her and longtime business partner Andrea Craig's early days on the Madison food scene at the Wilson Street Grill in 1987. "Fast forward to 2000-whatever, and purchasing locally takes on a new significance because of our environmental situations.

"The more miles our food travels, the more resources we waste from an environmental perspective," says Christy, who in 2002 shifted gears from restaurateur to entrepreneur with the launch of her creative consulting firm Meaningful People, Places and Foods.

Porchlight Products, an innovative business venture she and Craig developed, combines her deep concerns about food and disability issues by creating a "three-legged stool"



partnership between Dane County farms, people with disabilities who are transitioning from homelessness to independence, and Madison restaurants. Porchlight's staff will help extend the harvest by doing artisan food processing--canning jams and tomatoes, making crackers and pasta--for Madison restaurants that want to take full advantage of the harvests of area farms.

For Christy, the environmental movement is part of a larger whole: An initiative can only be successful if everyone has the opportunity to be involved--and to be valued for his or her contributions. She traveled to Italy last fall to participate in Terra Madre--Slow Food International's World Meeting of Food Communities--and reflects on the satisfaction she felt upon hearing discussion of the need to respect the human resources behind food peppered into conversations about the importance of biodiversity.

"My take is we're all in this together," says Christy. "How we treat the resources that we have--human and environmental--ultimately affects all of us. It's our world, our community."

### **The Goal Setter**

Making strategic decisions based on thorough R&D feasibility studies of what will have the greatest environmental impact with the given resources has marked Sonya Newenhouse's career. Take, for example, Community Car.

"We learned from the Union of Concerned Scientists that reducing your driving behavior is the single most important action that an individual can take to improve the environment," says Newenhouse. Her firm, Madison Environmental Group, decided to bring the car-sharing concept to Madison--providing members with high-mileage cars on an as-needed, hourly basis--with the goal of making as big a difference as efficiently as possible with a small staff.

Her firm's other eco-initiatives include advising businesses on ways to reduce their carbon footprint, including construction waste recycling for developers and construction firms. A desire to keep doors from deconstructed old buildings--what she saw essentially as trees--out of the landfill by giving them a second life led to the creation of Full Circle Furniture. Which led to her current initiative: Casa Kit Homes: 600- to 1,200-square-foot passive solar homes that unite the green building and small building movements under one roof. She says the easiest way to reduce one's carbon footprint is by living in a smaller home that uses less energy. "Just by living smarter and smaller, you're making a huge impact."

Another lightbulb goes, er, off as she gives voice to her latest brainstorm: neighborhoods that are certified organic. "All of the homeowners would follow criteria and not use pesticides," she says. "Think how safe that would be for the children, the pets, for the air and the land.

"The organic industry doesn't need to be just about out there in the farmland."



## **The Greens Keeper**

Community--or rather, linking communities--is what drives Carla Wright.

Wright works with the DNR's Green Tier, a program that rewards businesses for achieving superior environmental performance. She's a past president of the Midwest Organic Services Association and is active with the Prairie Enthusiasts. She serves on the board of the Natural Heritage Land Trust as well as the Wisconsin Organic Advisory Committee (along with Jahn).

Her talent lies in seeing the connections between these different constituencies--and in bringing those people into conversation. "I know about working lands and land-use patterns and I know about organics, so let me try to be a resource and facilitator for bringing some of these networks together," says Wright. "There are people within the agriculture community who are very interested in land preservation and conservation."

In March, she introduced some statewide business and environmental leaders at the state Capitol to Terry Tamminen, the former environmental advisor to Governor Schwarzenegger, who is now working with other states to enact laws, similar to those in California, that address global warming by dramatically reducing greenhouse-gas emissions.

Despite all this, Wright still feels she can do more. "I want to figure out what my offsets are, because I feel guilty about commuting in," says Wright of her 35-minute drive to downtown Madison.

Her home is a patchwork of oak savannah, pine trees and open prairie all sequestering carbon in their roots and trunks, keeping carbon out of the atmosphere, preventing it from contributing to global warming. And this land will be storing carbon in perpetuity, for Wright has sold a conservation easement on forty of her seventy-six acres.

"When I bought this farm twenty years ago I had this sense of obligation, of stewarding it," says Wright. "Around the township, I see a lot more development occurring, which makes me more dedicated to keeping this as it is. Because this is what's disappearing: These kinds of places where the songbirds live."

## **Modern Eco-Heroes**

One of Carla Wright's favorite quotes is from the renowned Wisconsin conservationist Aldo Leopold: "We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong we may begin to use it with love and respect." This sense that the webs of life are all intertwined clearly informs and motivates Wright, Christy, Jahn, and Newenhouse. For them, it's all organic.

*Laura Kearney is a freelance writer and editor who spends her spare time helping restore prairies and working for her food at Vermont Valley Community Farm.*