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Queen of green

Environmental pioneer Kay McKeen sees Earth Day lessons practiced daily

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Asking Kay McKeen to sit down and talk about saving the planet a couple of days before Earth Day's 40th anniversary is sort of like expecting Santa Claus to come for dinner on Christmas Eve.

Despite a hectic pace, the environmental activist and founder of School and Community Assistance for Recycling and Composting Education always is happy to report progress toward a time when every day is Earth Day.

One of the region's first green crusaders, McKeen agitated in the early 1980s to convince doubters that recycling was a feasible and worthwhile effort. Today, she's seriously pleased to see the populace awakening to issues she has championed for most of her life. She spent much of that time as a voice in the wilderness.

"The difference from when SCARCE started in 1990 is amazing," the Wheaton resident, 59, said Monday.

Nobody wants a landfill or a trash incinerator in their backyard, and that hasn't changed. The recent evolution has come through the broader mindset that is recognizing the impact of those and other environmentally detrimental disposal systems. We're connecting the dots at last.

"I think people are starting to really get it," McKeen said. "Asthma is an epidemic. Lung cancer is now the No. 1 cancer killer in the world."

Speeding up the wake-up call is the economic downturn, which has prompted many people to gain a new appreciation for conservation. Reducing consumption and recycling aren't just earth-friendly; they're belt-cinching measures.

But McKeen's topics list goes well beyond those basic tenets that launched the eco movement in the 1980s. Now she touches on watersheds and repurposed textbooks, farming practices and light bulbs, donated shoes and plastic made from corn husks -- sometimes in rapid succession. As McKeen sees it, they are all connected, each a component of the circle of life.

"We all live downstream of somebody," she said, mixing metaphor with literal truth.

Learning experiences

Perched just off Roosevelt Road in Glen Ellyn, the SCARCE home base is a maze of donated goods and educational displays. One section holds a large collection of binders, donated by businesses such as HSBC Bank and Tellabs in Naperville. Along one narrow passageway are neat stacks of crayons made from standard crayons that have been sorted, unwrapped, melted in a slow cooker and molded into giant versions of their former selves. Some are made into chunky shapes that can be grasped by artists with physical limitations that make them unable to manage the traditional sort.

Elsewhere in the cavernous headquarters, textbooks piled by the dozen into tall towers give local educators a source of free instructional materials. The nonprofit has diverted more than 3 million books from landfills since the collection program began in 1992.

"This is stuff teachers need," McKeen said.

Near the front of the center, a compact classroom area provides a place where small groups can come to learn about counter tops made of recycled glass and rain barrels that collect water that can be used to help plants grow -- without the chlorine that comes through the municipal pipelines.

Other props in the room show visitors how villagers in the Philippines have learned to weave from discarded newspapers the traditional baskets that they formerly made from reeds they pulled from creek banks, which accelerated erosion problems. They see a special bin filled with food scraps and pieces of eating utensils, food wrapping and disposable plates, all made from compostable corn products.

"When I started SCARCE, you really had to search for something to talk about," McKeen said. "Now you can't keep up."

Composting is a new hot topic. Collaborating with state Rep. Sandy Pihos, R-Glen Ellyn, McKeen helped craft legislation signed last year that soon will make green food-scrap bins available to every home and business address in Illinois. The new service will provide a lot of teaching moments, but she's ready.

"It's going to take some learning, just like recycling -- and we've still got a ways to go on that," she said.

A green team

Quick to note that her campaign runs on collaboration, McKeen readily deflects credit to her mostly volunteer crew and the county. SCARCE receives much support from DuPage funds, including an allocation that has paid for a special room where area teachers can come browse through colorful nature and art posters, and take what they can use. It's all part of the education aim.

"Really, there's no county doing this kind of in-depth education," McKeen said, adding that change comes in little steps.

With help from county funds, she helped a Carol Stream school start recycling milk cartons, a little step that brought the school a savings of \$168 per week. She noted that instead of pouring them down drains or into toilets, where they make their way into the water supply and stay there, county residents now can bring their unused medications to any of 14 police stations or the Naperville Fire Department for proper disposal. And environmentally sound building practices are popping up everywhere, McKeen said, evidenced here in Naperville's new public works center on Fort Hill Drive, the Park District's south maintenance facility on Book Road, and the white-roofed Springbrook Prairie Pavilion retail center on 75th Street.

McKeen brought her enthusiasm to the county's environmental committee earlier this month, sharing with its members her pleasure that green is the new black.

"Amazing changes, you guys," she said. "Really, it's rapid-fire now."