



Annual scholarship competition very inspiring

April 23, 2012 - Long Island

Last week I was one of five "judges" tasked with reading through over 100 essays received for our annual scholarship competition. In addition to supplying an academic transcript, a résumé and letter of recommendation, each student was to answer one required essay and one essay from a choice of two questions. The required essay asked what can be done to enhance sustainability in your school or community and how do you plan to continue to make an impact after graduating high school?

It was inspiring to read Graham Turk's essay (Platinum award winner) on how after seeing so many water bottles being discarded daily by fellow classmates he set out to create "The ReFill Project" (see refillproject.org), with a stated aim to decrease his schoolmates' dependence on disposable plastic water bottles. The project seeks to educate fellow students about the consequences of excess plastic usage and solve the problem by seeking to provide a viable alternative in the installation of bottle filling stations that filter water. The next step is the sale of attractive stainless steel reusable bottles. This project would reduce energy (fossil fuel) needed to make the plastic, reduce energy required to recycle the plastic, reduce CO2 and other pollutants, reduce carting costs, educate the consumer and help spread an important message beyond the bounds of the school, all while saving each student \$1.50 per bottle purchased in the school cafeteria daily.

On his first day of school, Ross Shulman was shocked by the lack of recycling bins and immediately "went to the advisor of the school's nascent environmental club and presented an idea for a recycling program." Shulman spent six hours per week repurposing copy-paper boxes, placing them in classrooms and speaking at faculty meetings to help encourage participation. Now, three years later, all classrooms have bins and Shulman estimates saving about 33,000 bottles and cans annually. Not content with restricting his efforts to his school alone, Shulman was inspired to lead a recycling and endangered species education effort at a local elementary school. As president of his school's H.O.P.E. (Helping Our Planet Earth) club, Shulman teaches "fellow club members and elementary school children about our fragile environment."

Teresa Oszkinis brought a smile with her efforts to encourage fellow students to participate in a national campaign entitled "Littering Is Wrong Too. Org". The idea is to think of an idea that is so obviously wrong and then add... "Littering is wrong too". For example, "Gas station sushi is wrong... Littering is wrong too, or Networking at funerals is wrong... Littering is wrong too. I'm sure you get the point and that's the beauty of it. It is a simple, fun and memorable way to help bring attention where needed.

Reading these essays offered much in the way of inspiration and encouragement, but also recognition that we still have a way to go in education surrounding "green building" and "sustainability." While there were so many wonderful essays and success stories, unfortunately the majority of essayists when discussing sustainability responded in one manner or another by equating sustainability to adding solar panels on their school, home or community buildings.

Solar pv and solar thermal panels offer tremendous hope in our efforts to reduce our dependence on fossil fuel. However, we will not ever get there unless and until we start to equate green building and sustainability with means and methods of reducing demand as opposed to providing additional supply. If you had a leaky bucket, the solution is not to switch from a garden hose to a fire hose; the answer may be to first plug the leaks.

Congratulations to all the students that participated. Each and every essay brought value to the competition and hope for the future of our shared environment.

Vince Capogna, LEED AP, is the executive director of US Green Building Council - Long Island and principal of Synergy Green Building Group, Inc., New Hyde Park, N.Y. Vince Capogna, Synergy Green Building Group

New York Real Estate Journal - 17 Accord Park Drive #207, Norwell MA 02061 - (781) 878-4540