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Brown student project aims to install thousands of energy-saving bulbs in local homes

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By Peter B. Lord

Journal Environment Writer



Kate Ganim, right, tests the compact fluorescent bulbs she installed to make sure the lamp works in an apartment at St. Elizabeth's Place in Providence, while Boaz Munro gets out another light bulb.

The Providence Journal / Kris Craig

PROVIDENCE — The students from Brown University were trying to explain their unusual, new environmental program to the elderly residents in a dining room at St. Elizabeth's Place last week. Standing next to a shopping cart filled with light bulbs, they explained how they would replace every incandescent bulb in every apartment with energy-saving compact fluorescent bulbs.

Brown and Wal-Mart were paying all the costs in an effort to help the environment, they said. There would be no charges. No contracts. No gimmicks.

"It's completely free to you," Libby Kimzey stressed, over and over.

One white-haired resident known for not using his hearing aid raised his hand.

“What do you do for people who can’t afford the bulbs?” he asked.

Nearly everyone in the room replied in unison:

“THEY’RE FREE!”

And so word spread rapidly, though not with complete success, through Providence last week that an unusual \$250,000 campaign was under way to benefit lower-income residents. The goal is to replace light bulbs in 5,000 homes and save the homeowners \$750,000 annually in energy costs.

Project 20/20 (named after the average number of light bulbs in each house) is the biggest and furthest along of four student projects at Brown designed to promote environmental sustainability in Providence.

The university’s Community Carbon Reduction Projects also include carbon emission projects at a middle school for low- and middle-income girls, installing programmable thermostats in Providence homes, and weatherizing houses to reduce energy consumption.

The light bulb program was the brainchild of environmental studies Prof. Steven Hamburg, who received national recognition after he persuaded Wal-Mart executives in 2005 to start selling and promoting compact fluorescent bulbs. H. Lee Scott, Wal-Mart’s chief executive officer, was looking to boost his company’s image, so he made a commitment to sell 100 million CFL bulbs by 2008.

Last year alone, Wal-Mart says, it sold 137 million CFLs, which it estimates saved its customers \$4 billion in energy costs.

Hamburg says an estimated 4.5 billion light bulbs are in use in the United States and that if 80 percent of them were replaced by CFLs, consumers would save \$10 billion annually in energy costs.

Hamburg, long an advocate for addressing climate change issues, is backing up his beliefs in a big way. He recently took a leave of absence from Brown to become chief scientist at the Environmental Defense Fund, one of the leading national environmental advocacy groups that focus on solutions to environmental problems.

“This position gives me a lot more opportunities to effect change,” Hamburg said last week from an Environmental Defense Fund office in Boston. “A lot is going to happen with the changes in the administration. Next year there will be climate change legislation and I want to be part of that.

“I’m about trying to effect positive change and not running around saying the sky is falling,” added Hamburg. “I think we can do a lot with the momentum that is building.”

Brown is working to reduce its carbon emissions by 2020 to the levels they were in 1990 — mimicking goals set by the Kyoto Protocol. But Hamburg said he wants to do much more.

For the 20/20 project, he raised \$100,000 from Brown and \$100,000 from the Wal-Mart Foundation. Wal-Mart also agreed to supply \$50,000 worth of bulbs.

For Wal-Mart, the project was a “no-brainer,” according to local spokesman Chris Buchanan.

The retail giant already had a good relationship with Hamburg, Buchanan said, and it had launched its campaign to make its stores more sustainable.

Sometimes the Brown students set up a table in the Providence Wal-Mart to solicit more homes to service.

Buchanan said he's not certain of Wal-Mart's plans for the bulb program's future, but he is sure the program could easily be replicated across the country.

Hamburg also devised a specific strategy to hire students to replace all the bulbs in each home. He believed that if you just give bulbs out, people hang on to them until their incandescents fail. Changing everything at once brings immediate energy savings. It also prevents people from comparing the quality of light. Some people don't like the appearance of the light from compact fluorescents. And it helps people get used to changing their energy usage.

Considering that the new bulbs could save 5,000 homeowners an estimated \$750,000 in energy use each year, they amount to a three-to-one return.

"Why aren't we doing that as a society?" Hamburg asked.

As they ramped up their work, Hamburg's students reached out to some New York City high school students who launched their own bulb replacement campaign last year with the help of Bob Jeffrey, a Providence native who now heads JWT, one of the world's top advertising agencies.

Sara Levinson, the mother of RelightNY project founder Avery Hairston, says the students have raised \$180,000 and distributed 25,000 bulbs in all five boroughs of New York City.

"It just keeps going," Levinson said. "And we've been contacted by a lot of groups who want to do similar efforts. People feel they have to do something."

In Providence, the 20/20 Project picked up speed as it hired students this summer. The project also picked up a valuable volunteer coordinator.

David Fox, a retired chief executive with a Ph.D. in mathematics, attended a climate lecture by Hamburg last year at First Unitarian Church. They talked afterward and Hamburg told Fox if he wanted to know more, he should audit his environmental studies class.

Fox did just that. And then he took another course.

He said Hamburg's positive personality convinced him to help with the bulb program. The upbeat attitudes of the students made it better.

"It's a pleasure just to be part of this," says Fox.

The group works out of a room at Brown's Urban Environmental Laboratory. Every few weeks, thousands of new bulbs are delivered.

So far, the students have distributed 7,500 bulbs to 450 homes, Fox said. It has another 700 homes lined up. The typical house needs 17 bulbs, though one house required 63 bulbs.

As the students installed bulbs in one apartment after another at St. Elizabeth's last week, a rumor spread among some residents that they could be harmed by the tiny quantities of mercury in each bulb.

Kimzey explained the bulbs contain 100 times less mercury than was used in the typical mercury thermometers people kept in their medicine cabinets.

Even so, the students agreed to remove the new bulbs they had just installed in two apartments.

They found plenty of opportunities to improve their limited expertise speaking Spanish. And most people still wanted the new bulbs.

"It started out as just a job," said Kimzey. "But it's cool to see the momentum being built. And it's fun to meet so many different people."

To sign up for new light bulbs, call (401) 863-7976 or send an e-mail to proj2020@gmail.com.

For more information, go to www.proj2020.org.

Wal-Mart has more information on its various sustainability efforts walmartstores.com/Sustainability/.

For more information on the New York City program, go to www.relightny.com.

plord@projo.com