

Profile:

Eco Ed

Living the green life in the Garden State

As a young boy, Ed Schwartz roamed the woods near his Morris County home, catching frogs and turtles and snakes. It was a simple, unstructured childhood that instilled in him a love for the outdoors and a healthy respect for the environment.

Today, he is reclaiming a small part of that childhood as an environmental activist, educator, and green business owner in Ridgewood, New Jersey. It is not a life he planned, exactly, but it feels right.

“As a kid, I became an environmentalist without knowing what that meant,” he says. “I cared about the environment because it was such a big part of my life. To think that the environment and sustainability is the main focus of my life now makes perfect sense—at least to me.”

Ed majored in finance in college and went straight into business, starting his climb up the corporate ladder almost right away. “My first job out of college, things went well; I had some significant accomplishments and was promoted a couple of times,” he says. “But in my mind, my biggest accomplishment was starting a recycling program at the company. It wasn’t in my job description—no one asked me to do it—but I made a contribution, and to me that was the most satisfying thing.”

Ed got truly serious about the environment soon after his son Kyle, now 14, was born. “He was two or three years old and I would take him to the parks and playgrounds,” he says. “But sadly, in Northern New Jersey you can’t catch turtles and snakes anymore—they’re gone. So I started thinking about why that happened. You look at all the development that’s been done here and the pollution that came with it, and we got active and have tried to do something about it. He and I have been doing river cleanups since he’s five years old.”

The big turning point in Ed’s eco-life came about three years ago. Ed and his then fiancé, Julie Tung, were looking for a home to buy when they came across a run-down old home on a shade covered corner in Ridgewood.

“It had fallen into disrepair,” says Ed. “The only other people making an offer on the property were some real estate developers. They wanted the land so they could demolish the house and build something new. But when we went inside, there was something about it that spoke to us. We were comforted.”

And they had a vision. Ed wanted a home in which he and his family could live sustainably, using their resources efficiently and responsibly. Julie, who was a little leery about suburban life, wanted a home that was unconventional and older.

The couple compromised on the Ridgewood home, which they agreed to take on as a restoration project and an exercise in green design and living. The result goes well beyond anything they imagined. Not only did Ed and Julie create the most sustainable historical home in New Jersey, they reinvented their professional lives. In the course of restoring their home, the couple, along with two other partners, formed a green consulting and building company called Green Living Solutions, which Ed now manages full-time while also keeping busy as an eco-presence in the community.

Breaking new ground

Ed and Julie were not entirely new to the home remodeling world when they started work on their Ridgewood home. The couple started purchasing investment properties a number of years ago while both worked in the corporate world. Meantime, Julie has overseen two restorations herself—an 1890s brownstone in Hoboken and an 1850s second empire Victorian in West Orange.

Still, the two were neophytes in the green building world, and they had a lot to learn. The good news: Ed and Julie are self-starters and had a good sense of what they wanted to accomplish. The bad news: it was very difficult to find contractors who could embrace their vision and implement it. “Every contractor we talked to wanted to gut it to the studs and start over again,” says Ed. “But we wanted a 250-year-old house and we were willing to accept some of the imperfections that come with it.”

They also had great difficulty locating contractors who were familiar with green building principles, materials and technologies. The green building industry was just getting off the ground. The United States Green Building Council had just recently been established. There were no LEED green building standards for residential restorations, and few people were trained in this specialty. “Back then, a contractor was a contractor,” says Ed.

It was even difficult to find a “green” architect. Ultimately, Ed and Julie chose someone for his experience with older homes, not for his expertise in sustainability.

“At least here in New Jersey, renewable energy and sustainable practices were not widely understood and gaining popularity like they are today,” says Ed. “Al Gore’s ‘An Inconvenient Truth’ came out right before we got started. Climate change was just starting to become a major issue with the American public. People weren’t aware of these things in a big way.”

Rediscovering the past

Ed and Julie also found themselves looking back several centuries for knowledge and inspiration. “One of the most interesting things we learned during this process is that 250 years ago, people did more green building than they do today,” says Ed. “They did it out of necessity. The houses back then were typically north-south orientation, to take advantage of the sun. There was no air conditioning back then, and relatively crude heating. If you didn’t build *with* nature, the home wouldn’t be livable.

“People used locally grown trees and stones, because they had to,” Ed continues. “Typically, unless you were aristocracy, you couldn’t truck in materials from hundreds of miles away. These days, people seem to forget these things when they build new houses, and especially when they put in heating and cooling systems.”

Sharing their experience

As Ed and Julie navigated their way through the Ridgewood project, people started inquiring about it, and the couple was happy to share what they were learning.

“People sought us out, and it was very satisfying to be able to pass our knowledge along,” says Ed. Soon, they found that there was a tremendous appetite for advice about energy-efficient, sustainable design.

“A perfect storm happened around this time—a macroeconomic trend, really,” says Ed. “Energy prices started skyrocketing and the general public started getting interested because of their rising utility bills. People might not realize it, but utility costs are now a homeowner’s third biggest cost, after mortgage payments and property taxes. It’s becoming unmanageable for a lot of people.”

At the same time, the state and federal governments are trying to make it easy to do the right thing, especially now. “We have the issues of climate change and air quality, plus we’re in a recession,” says Ed. “So government is offering significant rebates to get people moving now instead of putting it off for several more years.”

Ed and Julie made a concerted effort to reach out to the community, volunteering with several state and local environmental organizations, working with local schools and community groups, and participating on panels.

They also saw a business opportunity that combines green consulting and helping homeowners retrofit existing homes to more efficient standards. “As soon as the state adopted a program, we went for additional training with New Jersey’s Clean Energy Program and Home Performance with Energy Star,” says Ed. They also educated themselves about national programs, initiatives and incentives available to consumers.

Today, they operate a thriving business, even as they focus on finishing and moving into their new home. “We’ve helped 200-300 homeowners in the last couple of

years,” says Ed, “and we welcome other people into our home. We see it as a living laboratory. We don’t see the house as ours, completely.”

To that end, Ed and Julie have given tours of the house and have already hosted groups from local historical societies, adult education classes, and specialists from the green building industry.

“Making our existing homes more energy efficient is the single biggest thing we can all do to personally reduce the affects of climate change,” says Ed. “With this house, Julie and I have improved our little part of the planet. But we’re just getting started. We hope to have a much bigger impact and leave a legacy for the next generation.”