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Psst! Save the world; pass it on

Enjoying, sharing life's harvest

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This group first met back in April, just a few days past Earth Day. The members gathered one evening around the dining room table in the home of their leader, snacked on popcorn and pledged their summer to a new cause — helping the environment.

"I feel like you're the right people to be here or you wouldn't have come," Mary Ellen Vincent, the group leader, told them.

It may sound a bit like a conspiracy. But it's not.

Over the next four months, these seven residents, who live in Kansas City's Roanoke neighborhood, will join a growing number of Kansas Citians who are being trained to conserve energy, recycle and otherwise change their daily lives to improve the environment.

What's more, they're being trained by neighbors.

Like some new nonprofit twist on network marketing, Kansas City residents are teaching one another how to act on environmental issues, meeting in one another's homes at night to do so.

They're called EcoTeams.



Laura Shaughnessy (left) showed off her small backyard garden to members of her environmental group: Jean Lebedun, Alan Steinlage and Bill Brown. The group meets regularly to share environment-friendly tips on living.

Last summer, a seed group of four teams began. By fall, the number of teams will have grown to 16, each with five or six households participating.

Within five years, the EcoTeam organizers hope that Kansas City will have 10,000 households trained to help the environment through EcoTeams.

"We want 15 percent of the households in 15 percent of the neighborhoods," said June Holte, EcoTeam manager in Kansas City.

Once that many people are on board, according to a

theory of social change known as social diffusion, the movement takes on a life of its own, Holte said.

Many people say they are willing to make changes to help the environment, Holte said. But they don't make those changes for lack of information or support.

Change doesn't have to hurt.

"This is not about sitting in the dark in your home and shivering," Holte said. "Some people have the idea that this is radical environmentalism."

The program focuses on

taking small steps — like turning the water off while you're brushing teeth, or switching to compact fluorescent light bulbs, or using a soaker hose to water the lawn rather than a big sprinkler.

If this neighborhood campaign can eventually persuade many of the city's residents to do the same, "think of the resources and money that will be saved," Holte said.

"And people should understand these are steps that are not going to diminish their quality of life."

Environment-friendly neighbors are spreading the word



EcoTeams use printed materials like these to help spread their environmental message.

Each household pays \$35 to participate. But participating holds the promise of cutting utility bills and saving in other ways that also help the environment. Nationally, the program has calculated that a household, on average, can save up to \$420 a year.

The city of Kansas City supports the program. Last year, it matched a \$50,000 grant from the Mid-America Regional Council, which helped get the EcoTeam program started in Kansas City, said Gail Andersen in the city's Office of Environmental Management.

Five U.S. cities, including Kansas City, have neighborhood-based campaigns designed by the Global Action Plan, a non-profit environmental education group in Woodstock, N.Y.

"The biggest thing about EcoTeam is we're helping to change behavior," Andersen said.

"You can do an information campaign and hope people get it, hope they change," Andersen said. "But this is a better investment."

Since the first meeting in April, the EcoTeam members in the Roanoke neighborhood have covered much of a 106-page workbook, pledged to take specific actions in their lives and met with one another to share tips on their improvements.

Last week, the group met at the home of David and Laura Shaughnessy. David is a commercial photographer. Laura works at AT&T while she pursues a graduate degree in mental health counseling.

The team's captain is

Alan Steinlage, a postal clerk. Other members include a salesman, a physician's wife and a professional speaker.

Each began at a different spot. Some did little for the environment. At least one already had made a deep commitment to a more "sustainable" lifestyle.

Steinlage has been a vegetarian for years. He's shucked his car, shops at natural food stores and is even considering nontoxic paint for his next home project.

This night's topic is consumption. Over the last four months, the groups have met over snacks or dinner — this night it's a vegetarian meal — as a team member led the night's discussion on a topic. They've covered water and energy conservation, recycling and transportation.

They tally how each lives regarding those issues, then make pledges on how they might change, gathering tips from the workbook or one another.

The process has brought the team close together.

"We knew each other before this, but now we're a lot closer," said Laura Shaughnessy.

Now they swap tools, cappuccino makers and other items to decrease consumption. They hope to make tablecloths for the block party, rather than buy

disposable ones. This year they brought recycling bins to that party, too.

They carpool. Some help Steinlage, the carless one, on trips to the grocery or other stores. They're even exploring the idea of turning some nearby public land into a neighborhood garden.

Yet they don't all agree or fall into lockstep for the cause. Bill Brown, the salesman, was strident in not supporting organic meat.

"I think it's a luxury for the affluent," he said.

On the subject of consumption, Steinlage couldn't help but press Jean Lebedun, the professional speaker, about her penchant for shopping.

"You don't have to shop for satisfaction," he suggested.

"Yes, I do," she said stridently. "No. No. I'm not giving up shopping."

But that's OK. For in this program EcoTeam members find their own satisfaction.

"This is the way to find out what your own level of interest (in the environment) really is," Laura Shaughnessy said.

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