In the early 1990s, as our last child moved out of the home, we isolated ourselves for a four-month sabbatical at the Oregon coast to reflect on our future. Concerned about the environment, we considered what we might do if Dick were to retire from his law firm at an early age to join Jeanne as a fulltime volunteer.

We decided he should retire so we could pursue our highest vision: to build a truly sustainable culture in the Northwest and in the process become a model and source of inspiration for those living in other regions. Rather than await top-down legislation and policy, the transformation would have to occur from the ground up—through fundamental change initiated by motivated individuals in their neighborhoods, workplaces, schools, and other circles of influence.

Over the past 20 years, we have founded three local nonprofits to inspire and support citizens to be effective agents of change for Earth and community. Looking back, we marvel at the dramatic shift in the culture of the Portland area. Urban farming, bicycle transport, farmers’ markets, green building practices, and the sharing economy have become commonplace. Conspicuous consumption and the giant Hummer have become, for the most part, embarrassing relics of the past. Portland is a very different place than it was 20 years ago. And essentially every change can be traced back to the creativity and initiative of individuals.

In that cabin at the Oregon coast, we knew we could not predict the specifics of how innovative citizens would transform our culture. Who could have guessed that downtown offices would eschew disposables, plastic bags would be eliminated from grocery stores, food scraps would be collected curbside, young people would forgo owning a car in favor of car sharing and biking, or that a TV show would bring fame to the quirkier “green” sides of Portland by spoofing all of the above?

Collectively we have taken a giant stride along the path to sustainability. In this report we honor the efforts of so many of you. These efforts have provided a springboard for a new phase of citizen activism going forward.

The next phase of cultural change will not be easy. Much of the low-hanging fruit from the stems of heightened awareness has been harvested. The harder-to-reach fruit requires us to redouble our resolve and motivation. The Center will continue to pour relentless energy into training and supporting you Earth Leaders—as Agents of Change, as Eco-School parents, as professionals on the sustainability vanguard, as naturalists in the lives of children.

— Jeanne and Dick Roy, Co-Founders
Change

In the School
The experience of daily life in elementary school teaches a child the norms of her culture. As a result of efforts of parents in our Portland Eco-School Network, students now have durable trays and forks instead of disposables, and many sort lunch waste such as milk cartons, plastic tubs, and food scraps into categories for recycling and composting. To minimize car traffic, parents organize “bike trains” and “walking school buses.” Asphalt has been ripped up and native plants or vegetables planted. In some schools, the garden produce is used in the lunch program.

In the Workplace
In the past, box lunches for office meetings filled trash cans with an assortment of disposables. Today many offices use their own washable plates and utensils and direct caterers to provide buffet-style lunches. They may order organic, vegetarian, local food as well! Offices have as many as 13 separate bins to segregate recyclables, and some have green containers for food scraps. Because so many commuters bike to work, most office buildings now have bike storage racks inside.
Within the Profession

Since the Center formed Oregon Lawyers for a Sustainable Future in 2007, Portland law office culture has undergone visible change. Paper use has been reduced, and some firms are moving to become paperless. Progressive firms have adopted sustainability policies. The 2010 Oregon State Bar Membership Directory proudly displayed a wind turbine on its cover. And continuing legal education (CLE) programs offered by the Sustainable Future Section include variety not found even five years ago. (See sidebar.)

In Personal Lifestyle

With a boost from the Center's 190 Home Eco-Parties and 60 Path to Zero Waste presentations in downtown workplaces, individuals have become more intentional in adopting Earth-friendly practices. Many are on the path to zero waste, working diligently to get the right items in the curbside bin, taking other items to depots, and composting their food waste—either at home or curbside. Shoppers take their durable bags to the grocery store. Homeowners grow their own vegetables, and some raise chickens for fresh eggs. The old use-it- once, throw-it-away culture is becoming a thing of the past.

In the Community

Agents of change are making their neighborhoods more sustainable and vibrant. Yards are transformed from green grass to edible or native landscaping, increasing habitat for birds and other pollinators. Residents are growing vegetables and purchasing produce at farmers’ markets and directly from farm CSAs. Homes have better insulation, and solar panels are common on residential roofs. Sharing is popular, particularly among the young. Owning a car is no longer essential with various transit and car-sharing options readily available. And co-housing with shared community buildings, gardens, and play space, is popular with those who seek a deeper sense of community with neighbors.

CLE PROGRAMS THEN AND NOW

Old – illustrative titles
• Estate planning
• Understanding your jury
• Landlord tenant law

New Sustainable Future Section – actual programs
• Valuing ecosystem services
• Coal export debate
• The steady state economy

PREAMBLE TO STOEL RIVES’ SUSTAINABILITY POLICY

The attorneys and staff of Stoel Rives remain committed to meeting the needs of today without compromising those of tomorrow. We commit to be a leader among law firms and within the larger business community in reducing our Earth impacts and in serving clients who pursue sustainability goals.
Joy of Community

Although creating a truly sustainable culture is a serious business, and there is much hard work to be done, those involved derive the joy of a community with a sense of purpose. One goal of the Center is to bring agents of change together to share values and have fun.

Clockwise from left: Agent graduates play story game; Eco-School Network kids clean up coast; Short break from beach cleanup.