

Little Lessons in Sustainable Living

Following the Osborne family in their quest for a “greener” lifestyle.

by Donald Fraser

At the tender age of six, Kylie Osborne had no idea that she was so important. But there she was, standing in front of a roomful of dedicated environmentalists, politicians and visiting dignitaries, representing the future of our community.

She had been invited to stand at the podium as Dr. Raymond Dart, chair of the Peterborough Green-Up Board of Directors, talked about the importance of sustainable living. The occasion was the 15th anniversary of the forming of Peterborough Green-Up, and Kylie was wearing her party dress.

Amidst the celebration, Dr. Dart offered a sober warning to his audience. “Kylie here is inheriting the world that we have influence over now. The choices and decisions that we make will affect her quality of life, and the quality of life of her eventual children.”

And, as Dr. Dart reminded everyone in the room, our actions are having an immediate impact on the lives of our children.

Some of the facts are quite alarming. According to the Ontario Medical Association, there are an estimated 5,800 premature deaths per year as a result of smog-related illness. In Canada, rates of childhood asthma have risen dramatically. From 1978 to 1995, the percentage of children with asthma increased from 2.5 per cent to 11.2 per cent. It seems that every year we are experiencing more poor air quality days, longer periods of intense heat and drought, and more and more of the bizarre weather patterns that are associated with global climate change.

Kylie’s world is getting tougher to live in.

After her big moment onstage, I asked Kylie what she thought needed to be done to help the environment. After the speeches of environmentalists, politicians, and invited experts, her answer was refreshingly simple: “We have to take care of our world so it doesn’t get dirty.”

Out of the mouths of babes...



I recently spent an afternoon in the tree-shaded backyard of the Osborne residence, interviewing the family about their attempts to make their lives more environmentally sustainable. Dad, Jerry, mom, Michelle, and their three children, Kylie, 6, Caleb, 4, and Jacob, 2, have agreed to share their experiences with *Peterborough Kids*. Over the next year, we will share the tips they have gleaned while trying to make their lives more “green.” While we will be tackling issues such as home energy, transportation choices, and pesticide-free gardening, they wanted the



Photo: Gerri Weatherber

first article to deal with the positive choices that they are making as parents to teach their kids about the world around them.

“I grew up on a farm, way north of Peterborough,” says Michelle, “and it wasn’t until recently that I discovered how environmentally friendly people usually are when they are forced to live off the land. And it is taking me awhile to re-learn some of the lessons that I gained back then.”

Jerry agrees. “With supermarkets, big-box stores and convenience stores on every corner, we have gotten used to buying whatever we want, whenever we want, and not thinking about the waste or where these things come from. And driving around in our cars, we don’t think about the pollution we create.”

Both Michelle and Jerry are alarmed that their kids could grow up without even thinking about mass packaging, tonnes of individual waste, and the huge quantities of carbon dioxide that are created from our consumer-driven lifestyles, including transporting our food from far away. They are worried about climate change. And so they are tailoring their concern into simple lessons for the kids.

“We started with where their food comes from,” says Jerry. “That is a lesson learned three times a day.”

While neither Michelle nor Jerry claim to have green thumbs, they have started a little food garden on their property. “Kids can learn where food comes from that way,” he explains. “It doesn’t have to be shipped from far, far away. It can be grown at home, or bought at farmers’ markets and local suppliers, like butchers and bakers.” They make sure that the kids are a part of the whole food production process, from tending the garden and digging the weeds, to cooking, and even canning the fruits and veggies that come from their property.

“Kylie is old enough now to understand how difficult food is to produce,” says a beaming Michelle. “When you contrast how much work goes into a tiny garden to how much food there is in a supermarket, it really hits home.”

The learning opportunities that stem from food choices are plenty, Michelle explains: “When you have your home-grown food – even the small amount grown on a town-sized property – and you buy locally from farmers and local businesspeople, you end up with very little waste from packaging. After seeing local produce and products, kids get it when you show them the garbage that comes from pre-packaged products.”

Both parents have backgrounds where they once worked for retail superstores, so they understand that people must still rely, to a certain extent, on retail outlets.

“The point isn’t that they should avoid retail at all costs,” says Jerry. “It is about learning where food comes from. And where all the products that they use everyday come from. And how much packaging there is. And how difficult it is to create this stuff and to get rid of the waste.”



“It is about teaching them to make wise decisions.”

“And wise decisions include dealing with the waste you do end up creating,” adds Michelle. “Teaching kids things like composting helps them realize the importance of smart waste reduction. They can see the food waste that they create being used to help grow more food in the garden. Heck,

we had the food scrap heap in the back when I was a kid and never thought of putting vegetable waste in the garbage. Kylie, Caleb, and Jacob won’t either.”



While everyone has heard of the 3 Rs of waste reduction (reduce, reuse, recycle), Jerry and Michelle are teaching the kids two more Rs. “We want them to rethink their potential purchases, and refuse items that are not environmentally friendly,” explains Michelle. “While in the store, if Kylie asks for, let’s say, Lunchables, then I have her rethink the idea. Is there a better way to get similar products, like meat from the deli and crackers with less packaging? We can then refuse items that are not environmentally friendly.”

Even getting to the store can be a lesson. “Growing up, Peterborough was the big town,” Michelle explains. “It was the place where we did our shopping. On average, we’d only go once a month, so it was a pretty big deal.”

Jerry picks up where Michelle leaves off. “We want the kids to understand that taking the car is a luxury. We’re not going to the store every day. That’s a waste of gas, and it is polluting unnecessarily.”

Energy efficiency is also being taught to the children at an early age. “Caleb and I went around the entire house changing light bulbs, putting in compact fluorescent ones. I think the simple act of doing this with him will leave a more lasting memory than just telling him about it.”

He also carries Jacob around the house, having the two-year old turn out lights as they leave the room. There is a mantra that each of the older kids know, “If you’re not using it, turn it off.” This goes for television, games, lights, everything. Each of the children now know that windows and doors stay shut when the furnace or air conditioning is on. If they are cold during the winter, they are told to grab a sweater and make sure they are wearing socks. Most of the time, it is not the thermostat that needs adjusting.

These may sound like simple lessons, but as Michelle points out, “there are still a lot of adults out there who don’t follow these rules.”

Other steps are not nearly as simple – things like performing energy retrofits on a home and setting up a fuel-saving transportation plan for the family – but are still easy to make a part of day-to-day life. In the upcoming months, we’ll follow the Osborne family as they take further steps to becoming more environmentally sustainable. We’ll watch them as they try, as Kylie succinctly put it, “to take care of our world.”



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