

Alternative lifestyle

By Rick Polito, IJ reporter
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BETSY ROSENBERG calls herself a "recovering SUV driver."

Now she wants more people to join her in "recovery."

Like a multitude of Marin moms, Rosenberg once navigated a vehicle equipped for off-road expeditions on trips no more taxing than shopping at Whole Foods. "Being a mom in Marin County, having a young child, I thought that was the modern equivalent of the station wagon," she says, confessing to the American addiction to "all this stuff we supposedly need."

"I bought into it," she says.

Then, Rosenberg says, she had a series of wake-up calls - not the least of them at the gas pump. The Mill Valley radio professional was already doing her EcoTalk (formerly Trash Talk) radio spots on KCBS and it became hard to ignore the irony of being an environmentalist in an Land Rover. She soon found herself downsizing. "I went from driving a gas-guzzling SUV to a gas-sipping Toyota Prius," she says, proudly touting a car that gets upwards of 50 miles per gallon.

Now she wants the rest of us to do the same. With a small group of Marin mothers, Rosenberg has launched what she calls a national campaign to pressure automakers to respond to the same wake-up calls she heard so clearly.

"Since industry and government is not leading the way, consumers really have to take matters into their own hands," she says.

The campaign, Don't Be Fueled, comes with the tag line "Mothers for clean and safe vehicles." Moms are a big part of the inspiration, says Don't Be Fueled co-founder and Strawberry grandmother Arlene Stark. The group was formed in the spring of 2002 after the U.S. Senate turned down a bill that would have raised automobile fuel efficiency standards. One of the arguments against the measure was that "Soccer moms needed their SUVs," Stark says. "It sounded as if women needed their SUVs and didn't care about anything else."

Soccer moms were getting a bad rap, Stark says.

"Soccer moms don't want their SUVs. They want cars that get good mileage and are big enough to transport their children," Stark says. "Nobody was speaking for them."

Rosenberg has become that voice.

She speaks to groups, gives interviews, continues her radio spots and recently had a meeting with a General Motors executive. She is trying, she says, to "change the world one sound bite at a time."

It might be working.

Jan Newman of Hillsborough attended one of Rosenberg's talks. She was also looking for a car. Noting that she lives in a neighborhood where a four-way stop is likely to be populated by four Mercedes Benzes, Newman acknowledges "I could go out and buy any car I wanted."

But after test-driving BMWs, Mercedes and a Lexus, Newman remembered what Rosenberg had told her.

She ordered the Toyota Prius.

"It doesn't have to be complicated. It doesn't have to be expensive. It just has to be right," Newman says.

Now Newman is spreading the same message Rosenberg has been preaching.

"My neighbor said 'I think that's the next car I'm going to buy,'" says Newman.

Marin IJ: How did you become fuel conscious? Was there a wake-up call?

Betsy Rosenberg: There were several. As a consumer, the hidden costs associated with driving a gas-thirsty vehicle became apparent as soon as we bought an SUV about eight years ago - both in terms of sticker price and more frequent visits to the gas station. Later, as a budding environmentalist, I learned about how much more oil, particulate pollution and greenhouse gases come out of the larger vehicles, like the one I was driving. After doing an EcoTalk series on fuel alternatives, including bio-diesel and hybrids, I finally traded in my SUV for a Toyota Prius. The aftermath of 9-11 made me more aware that our country's dependence on oil - we're 5 percent of the world's population and we use 25 percent of the global supply - was not only unsustainable but suicidal from a geopolitical and national security perspective. I could no longer ignore the irony of seeing so many gas guzzling and higher-polluting vehicles with flags and bumper stickers on them saying "God Bless America" and "Keep Tahoe Blue." It was right after the Senate voted against raising CAFE (corporate average fuel economy) standards in the midst of calls to drill in the Arctic Wildlife Refuge that I found myself muttering things like "God Help America."

IJ : Do you think people see the connection between their driving habits and the rest of the world?

BR: No, nor do I think most of us recognize the connection between our behavior as consumers and our environment. That's what my radio program is about, connecting the dots and showing how and why what we do - as citizens, as companies, and as a country - matters in terms of ecological and economic impact. But while it's difficult for us, as individuals, to change what comes out of power plants, factories and other major sources of pollution, we can have an impact on air quality and oil consumption with our car purchases. Most people don't realize how much our cars contribute to the estimated 100,000 premature deaths due to bad air quality in this country and the epidemic childhood asthma rates. If the rest of the world followed our consumption habits, we'd need several more planets to sustain such a large ecological footprint.

IJ: What is it going to take to get more people to make that connection?

BR: It's going to take a lot more education in the mass media as well as in schools to demonstrate the link between personal well-being and planetary health. There are more than enough dramatic examples of this out there today; dioxin and PBDE's (flame retardant used in common household products) showing up in breast milk and dangerously high levels of mercury in tuna and other fish. The emerging issue of "environmental health" is what may finally get people to wake up to consequences of cultural denial and corporate irresponsibility. Most of the 75,000 chemicals in use in the U.S have not been tested for health effects. Not to mention the unknown impact on those coming seven generations behind us.

IJ: If Marin is environmentally conscious, why is everybody driving these huge cars?

BR: We thought our corner of the country was a perfect place to launch Don't Be Fueled, given the co-existence of so many residents who can afford to buy and drive SUVs, and so many people who consider themselves to be environmentally conscious - they're often the same people. I can talk because I was one of them. Many of us, especially parents, bought into the notion that SUVs are safer and a perfect family vehicle. After reading a book called "High and Mighty SUVs, The World's Most Dangerous Vehicles" by New York Times correspondent Keith Bradsher, I can no longer accept that illusion. Unfortunately, the book has not been widely read. If it were, I think we'd realize our campaign's goal of a hybrid in every driveway much sooner.

IJ: Why do you think SUVs are so popular?

BR: It's about perceived safety, size and status. Many people have bought the image the auto companies have spent billions to perpetuate: That these vehicles are safer, designed for outdoor enthusiasts, and with eco-friendly names like the Tahoe, Sequoia, Denali and Escape, perfect for taking up to the mountains to

commune with nature. The latest Hummer ads market these menacing vehicles as "toys for big girls and boys." Yeah, maybe if you have a metal disorder of some sort. It's an extension of the supersizing of America - obesity on wheels - we really need to call for a Momcott of American over-consumption in all its current forms. It's really not good for us.

IJ: What do you say when somebody says "I need my SUV?"

BR: I hear it all the time and sometimes it's true - if someone has more than two children, or they carpool a lot. But many who feel they need an SUV really don't. Less than 5 percent use them off road, most soccer moms don't schlep the whole team around, and all that "stuff" we think we need could usually fit in a trunk. If not, then maybe you have too much stuff. I thought when I became a mom that I needed an SUV, but now I drive a Prius, which seats five, and have no problem taking my daughter and two friends, and their backpacks, in my car. They're kids - small human beings, not cows. Besides, what do we really need? An ever-larger vehicle to haul the contents of our homes around in, or smarter, smaller and much more efficient vehicles to help reverse the perils of lung disease, terrorism, global warming and war. It's time to wake up and smell what's coming out of our tailpipes. For families who still feel the need for a larger car I offer this advice - make your second car a hybrid. If, on occasion, you really do need a larger vehicle, consider renting as we just did for a ski trip to Tahoe. We paid less to borrow an SUV for two weeks than we used to pay for a month of leasing the same vehicle.

IJ: Short of selling their car and buying a hybrid vehicle, what is the simplest and easiest first step people can take?

BR: Well, the first thing I suggest is to go to our Web site at www.dontbefueled.org where questions like these are addressed and sign our petition to automakers saying, "Build them and we will buy them." Our campaign is designed to increase both demand and supply for cleaner and safer vehicles in general, and more specifically, to get more hybrids into development, production and circulation. It's the perfect transition vehicle until we get to the hydrogen age. In the meantime if you're in the market for a car, look for the most fuel efficient model that meets your needs. Next piece of advice would be to carpool, walk or bike whenever possible and keep idling to a minimum. Also, keep car and tires tuned for maximum efficiency.

IJ: The name of your organization includes the words "Mothers for Clean and Safe Vehicles." Why is the mom angle important?

BR: A couple of reasons. One is that "soccer moms" were mentioned in the Senate argument against tighter CAFE standards. Secondly, moms are the primary group driving SUVs. Thirdly, our primary "job" as mothers is to protect and nurture our children and keep them safe. We're also concerned about

Mother Earth. And last, but not least, as mothers we have cultural permission to be morally outraged when our genuine best interests are co-opted or ignored.

IJ: Does your daughter walk to school?

BR: Yes, but not often enough. We live close enough to school but on a Mill Valley hillside with very narrow, winding streets. With few sidewalks, and the SUV parade lined up in the morning, there's not a great pedestrian safety zone. That, and the fact we tend to run late.

IJ: Do you have to stop yourself from nagging your friends about their cars?

BR: I like to think of it as inspiring and informing rather than nagging, but I am a mother so I can be a pretty good nag too. When I ask other parents if they wouldn't prefer a more fuel-efficient version of what they are driving - a hybrid SUV, station wagon or mini-van, for instance - they always answer "yes," and almost always follow with, "But are they making them?" The answer, for the most part, is no. We're still awaiting the debut of the much-touted Ford Escape hybrid SUV. Lexus is due out with its hybrid SUV next year and GM has announced a few hybrid pickup and SUV models in the planning stages. But don't expect to see them anytime soon. With the majority of U.S. auto companies still taking a wait-and-see approach before investing in new and cleaner technology, Honda's and Toyota's (the only two companies currently selling hybrids) sales and stock prices have never been hotter. Didn't we learn anything in the '70s? And whatever happened to American ingenuity? Am I nagging?