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Civic Matters A Catalyst for Community Dialogue

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Sustainability in the Transportation Sector—An Activist's Journey Emily McGlynn

Last spring and summer, I was an intern at Energy Vision (EV), a national nonprofit organization that researches, analyzes and promotes pathways to pollution-free renewable energy sources, especially focusing on phasing out the use of petroleum in transportation. I met Joanna Underwood, the chair, president and founder of this organization and an alumna of Bryn Mawr College, in the spring of 2006 at a talk she gave about EV's sustainable transportation initiatives. I was really inspired by her presentation, which outlined the strategy for converting the nation's garbage trucks to run on natural gas, thereby paving the way to a completely sustainable, hydrogen-fueled transportation sector.

I contacted Joanna at the end of that summer, wanting to find out how I could help with EV's work, and we immediately discovered a shared mindset: environmental activism requires real action. I knew I wanted to take on a significant project to continue the process of integrating compressed natural gas (CNG) refuse trucks into waste-hauling fleets across the country, but Joanna said this level of involvement would require a lot of time and dedication. She believed the work I did for this project would merit college credit, and so I looked for a way to structure my plan for activism within an academic class. While many of the Bryn Mawr departments I approached were uneasy at first about allowing so much of an independent study project to be field-based, the Civic Engagement Office was instrumental in helping me arrange a Praxis III independent study course and was very welcoming of an atypical internship format. The structure of



"Through my Praxis III I learned to really look at situations from multiple angles."

— Laura Hummer '10 »

study course and was very welcoming of an atypical internship format. The structure of the Praxis III Learning Plan lent legitimacy to what I was trying to do, and both Nell Anderson and Julie Zaebst were encouraging throughout the process of fleshing out the goals and learning objectives of the project. I was able to work with Joanna as my field supervisor and biology lab instructor Wil Franklin as my faculty advisor. As an EV intern, I spent the spring 2007 term researching the scope of the Philadelphia refuse fleet and its emissions, ways the city might benefit from natural gas garbage trucks, and options for funding and organizing such a program.

That summer I continued this work by writing a report on the results of my research and distributing it to the many city decision-makers I had been in contact with during the course of the research. In August, Joanna and I went to Harrisburg to discuss our initiative with Secretary Kathleen McGinty of the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and members of her staff. Generally, we found interest and support there, as well as in the State Policy Office and from staff of the environmental organization Penn Future. In Philadelphia, we also engaged individuals in the city council, the campaign staff of Michael Nutter, the then-Democratic candidate in Philadelphia's mayoral election, and some officials in the Philadelphia Fleet Management Department.

The work I did over the summer came to a head last fall at an exhibition event in Philadelphia. I helped organize this event, co-sponsored by EV and the Greater Philadelphia Clean Cities Organization, at which city officials and fleet managers could actually see a natural gas garbage truck demonstration. They had the opportunity to ask questions of leading natural gas and refuse truck experts (from Clean Energy and Hallahan Truck Sales) about the technology, the funding and the process of designing a natural gas refuse truck program for the city. The final outcome was very encouraging: participants in our event, from both the fleet and the political ends of the spectrum, are independently taking the process further. The fleet officials are going to visit facilities where natural gas trucks are produced, and the city officials are considering policy proposals used elsewhere to support alternative fuel refuse truck initiatives. The results of this past year's work thus were very promising, and we are now moving quickly forward as many of the city decision-makers are conducting their own investigations into how they can go about purchasing these trucks.

The most valuable thing I learned during my work with EV was a very personal realization. I found that I am able to accomplish things that initially seem utterly impossible. There were many times during the course of this project that I thought I had hit a dead end: dealing with busy city employees and fleet managers, many of whom were disgruntled at having to deal with a nosy college student; getting hung up on; not getting most of my calls returned; getting lost in the city; and having people tell me that I was absolutely wrong and that my research was unfounded were all obstacles that were very draining emotionally. The energy sustainability and economic issues facing

were very draining emotionally. The energy sustainability and economic issues facing our country and local governments are very difficult to maneuver, always involving complex political relationships and the bottom line as the ultimate deciding factor. It is definitely a bucket of cold water in the face to come out of the "Bryn Mawr Bubble" as an enthusiastic idealist just to have busy, hardened city officials brusquely reject your ideas. Nevertheless, I benefited greatly from Joanna's expertise and strategic thinking in this area in which she has worked for over a decade. I have truly grown stronger and more confident by working through these problems, learning to stay positive at all times and to keep my main goal driving me forward.

What is now required for the success of this project is to raise awareness about the importance and feasibility of taking immediate steps toward energy sustainability. This is why I am involving more students at Bryn Mawr in the CNG refuse truck initiative by developing and advising a class taught by Joanna this spring. The course guides students through the same process I navigated in researching and campaigning for the use of CNG trucks in Philadelphia, while simultaneously allowing them to practice the skills they will need as influential environmental activists.

Although the results I have seen from my work are rewarding, it is certainly not the end of the road. If there is one thing I've learned from my involvement with Energy Vision, it's that the road never ends. There is always a next step, and it's my job as an activist to find it and push forward, both inside and outside the classroom.

Emily McGlynn '09 is a biology major who is involved with a variety of environmental groups and initiatives, including increasing renewable energy use on campus, reducing waste and expanding the recycling program.