

Leadership Program for Sustainability Graduates First Class, Begins Second Year

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"My whole picture of the world has changed." The words could have been from any of the 23 people sitting in a circle at Finley Community Center, where a graduation ceremony completed the journey they began together nine months ago, as participants in the Leadership Training for a Sustainable Future. The course meets one full day each month; classes are taught by locally recognized leaders and experts, and include field trips to locations throughout Sonoma County. Although inspired by Leadership Santa Rosa and similar programs, this course focuses on promoting sustainability in every area of public policy, making it unique in the North Bay.

This journey into sustainability has only begun for many of the graduates, as they step into a wide array of leadership roles. For example, participants Scott Vouri and Terry Tinagero ran for city council in Petaluma and Santa Rosa, respectively; Elizabeth McCarthy of Sebastopol was recently appointed to the Human Rights Commission.

Deborah Grace took a different route. After an inspiring and informative class on water issues, she became outraged at the ongoing destruction of the Russian River by gravel mining and mismanagement by the Sonoma County Water Agency. Grace said: "Before the class I knew so little about these issues or was completely oblivious to them. The speakers and presentations inspired me to the point of taking action myself, and gathering friends together to correspond with our local representatives. This has been empowering not only for me, but my friends as well." Although she had never written to an elected official before, Grace organized a letter-writing campaign resulting in more than one hundred letters to Virginia Strom-Martin and other State Assembly Members. Those letters helped move Strom-Martins bill, AB38, out of committee and closer to passage.

The most dramatic changes have been in the thinking and daily choices of the participants. Tinagero, who had described himself as a typical conservative, now questions many prevailing assumptions. According to Tinagero, "Now I know that the status quo just isn't good enough. Before the course, my thinking wasn't even close to the concept of sustainability; I recycled, but that was about it. Now I'm asking why they're spraying, why we're doing what we're doing. Now I'm thinking about all of it, paying attention."

After making the connections between suburban sprawl, with its increased reliance on the auto to get everywhere, and global warming, environmental deterioration, the decline of community and quality of life, Vouri decided to sell his suburban home and move his family into downtown Petaluma. Now he - and his kids - can walk or bike to most destinations.