

Eric Henry

From greenhorn gardener to advocate of a greater, greener world

By Amber Rockwell

Imagine his father's surprise when 12-year-old Eric Henry told him that he wasn't going to ride in his dad's car. The car burned oil badly, and Eric didn't want any part in it.

And then there was the reaction of neighbors when they found out that young Eric had earned his own money to build a greenhouse in his parents' backyard – one that would house plants grown organically– at a time when most people hadn't dreamed of converting to organic gardening.

These were early signs of Eric Henry's environmental advocacy. Those same interests remained a motivating force in his life. After high school, Eric first went to NC State University, where he studied agriculture for two years. He then transferred to UNC Chapel Hill to pursue a business degree, at the same time launching a company called Creative Screen Designs that sold screen-printed apparel to college students.

"Eric has always been an entrepreneur," says Jan Henry, Eric's mother. "He's like my father in that he will try anything and almost always does it well." Maybe it was this entrepreneurial spirit that made Eric independent from a young age. "He never, ever asked us for money," his mother says. Whether it was the greenhouse he bought in middle school or the yellow Spitfire he purchased in high school, if Eric wanted something, he worked for it.

Combining his ingrained work ethic with an interest in business and apparel, Eric left Chapel Hill before the beginning of his senior year for his hometown of Burlington to join in a partnership with Tom Sineath of TS Designs.

That was 25 years ago. Today he is president of the company, whose business mission has transformed to "build a sustainable enterprise that simultaneously looks after the people, planet and profits." Competing in a global market that is typically driven by the lowest price has made the road of a domestic apparel supplier very tough.

Tom Sineath, who is CEO of TS Designs, says that the company's environmentally-friendly vision is mostly Eric's doing. "It is Eric who really gets the credit for pushing us down that path," Tom says, adding that Eric is always looking for new opportunities to make the business better in all ways. "In our business, Eric is the pioneer. He doesn't let things slow him down."

TS Designs is just one part of Eric's vision to transform the world in which he lives. He encourages people to take more responsibility in the way they spend their resources and to become more aware of the impact they have on the planet and society. Eric argues that we live in a time in which we do not know where our consumables come from: fuel from the gas station, clothes from the mall, or even food from the grocery store; we vote with our dollars and that vote, not Eric contends that the government moves slowly and can not completely or efficiently solve all our problems. "At the end of the day, it gets down to us and how we decide to live our lives."

Not excusing himself from this same responsibility, Eric strives to live in a manner that keeps him environmentally and socially friendly. "I was the first in the area that I am aware of to drive a car that doesn't run on petroleum. That was almost three years ago."

He also participates in and is an advocate of CSA, or community-supported agriculture. This is a cooperative effort that develops a relationship between the consumer and the farmer. The consumer pledges to support the farm in advance and, therefore, shares the risks and benefits of the farm's production. "It allows us to appreciate where our food comes from," Eric says, and it reinforces his philosophy of responsibility. "If we don't know where stuff comes from, we don't

know the impact it has on the environment or society.” Supporting a CSA farm allows the consumer to know exactly where his food comes from and keeps the dollars in our community that otherwise would go elsewhere.

As for his role in the community regarding the environment, Eric says that he’s “in everybody’s sandbox.” Eric is active on a couple of advisory boards at Elon University. He is a past board member of the Piedmont Land Conservancy, a group that encourages owners to conserve their property for themselves and future generations. He is also a past board member of the Bicycle Advisory Board and of the Alamance County Planning Board. Land planning in Alamance County, which emphasizes the “Z” word (zoning), is another issue that Eric has advocated for many years.

When he was with the Burlington Bicycle Commission, the group helped plan and build Burlington’s bike paths. He was on a committee that helped Burlington become a tree city, and he worked with an organization that encouraged Alamance to become the second county in the state to have mandatory recycling.

Today, he is working to help create a community grocery store that would support local agriculture and sell goods mostly produced locally. The plans are still in their earliest stages, but Eric says there have been “some very good meetings to determine interest.” He hopes to see the store in place within a few years.

Also near and dear to Eric’s heart is a project he started out of personal interest: the Burlington Biodiesel Co-op. Using a shell company called Local Action that helps start local community projects, Eric was able to get the co-op off and running (on biodiesel, of course). “Once the interest and the need to make more biodiesel grew, I spun it off into its own co-op. We now make between 100-200 gallons of biodiesel a week to serve 10 co-op members.” He calls it a perfect example of a sustainable product: a waste resource, produced locally, used locally, and with a positive impact on our local air quality.

So where’s the spare time? Sometimes it shows up as travel, although when he travels it involves business in some way, whether it is speaking to a school group or attending a conference. There are only three states that come to mind that he hasn’t been to – Montana, Idaho and Hawaii. He’s been to Europe and Canada, and hosted a “United Nations” panel discussion in Mexico on how to make environmental awareness and protection appealing to the next generation.

There’s also cycling in the summer and reading as much material as he can get his hands on. He’s not into fiction, but give him a good how-to book and he’s set. He and his wife of 23 years, Lisa, have a second home on the Blue Ridge Parkway that serves as a retreat. Both like to hike – day-hikes only, because Lisa is not a fan of camping.

So how does Lisa feel about all of Eric’s activism? “She’s a very supportive and a great ally,” Eric says. In fact, she shares many of his concerns and lifestyle choices. Six months after Eric got his biodiesel vehicle, Lisa got her own. They both are concerned about the way the community is growing – Eric thinks the community’s vision is very short-sighted – and one day hope to move into the county where he and Lisa can be more self-sufficient, growing much of their own food and providing other necessary resources.

Moving out in the county would also give Lisa room to house her horse. Chante is currently boarded elsewhere.

All of this environmental passion running through his veins begs the question – is it hereditary? Nope, but it is contagious. Jan says that Eric has made her more environmentally aware and that her perennial herb garden would have never been started without him. “We learned it all from Eric,” she says of herself and Don.

So, although Kermit the Frog might lament on how hard it is to be green, Eric Henry would probably tell you that it is well worth it, even if it isn’t always easy.

For more information on TS Designs, visit [tsdesigns.com](http://tsdesigns.com). For more information on the Burlington Biodiesel Co-op, visit [burlingtonbiodiesel.org](http://burlingtonbiodiesel.org).

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