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Green ventures

Area Jews build businesses with earth in mind

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Abigail Rome has marked Passover in an Andean village and lit Chanukah candles with friends in the wilds of Ecuador.

"We bought some radishes, put some hot sauce on top and that was our maror" or bitter herb, says the Takoma Park woman, recalling a homespun seder during her Peace Corps stint in the early 1990s.

Rome blended her background in biodiversity conservation and her international interests to launch Tierra Vista Tours and Consulting eight years ago.

The one-woman enterprise joined the growing field of eco-tourism, itself part of the burgeoning crop of green-oriented businesses around the local area, the nation and parts of the world.

The emergence of green ventures occurs as environmental concerns are coming to the fore in such Jewish contexts as the World Zionist Congress, which last week in Israel adopted resolutions on stream cleanup and recycling at the behest of the still-fledgling Green Zionist Alliance.

In the District, meanwhile, architect Jim Schulman has turned his vision of green design into Community Forklift, a 40,000-square-foot Hyattsville warehouse full of surplus and salvaged building materials.

Opened last November, this retail outlet, a wholly owned subsidiary of Sustainable Community Initiatives, a nonprofit that Schulman also founded, generates a modest paycheck for him plus three other full-time and one part-time employees.

A member of the District's Temple Micah, Schulman went into business through the side door.

After training close to 30 chronically underemployed city residents in "building deconstruction," he resolved to halt until he had a store to market salvaged components. He chose the Community Forklift location with an eye to providing a resource for lower-income neighborhoods.

"Even though most of our donations come from the tonier parts of town, the preponderance of our customers come from the eastern part of the metro region," Schulman says. "In general, we're serving the less affluent" clientele.

As to the green aspect of his venture, he cites studies suggesting that most environmental harm results from

extraction of materials < from metals to trees.

"By keeping these building materials in circulation, we inhibit new virgin products from being manufactured. There's a little less mountaintop mining, a little less clear-cutting of forests because we're selling surplus and salvaged materials," Schulman says.

Now surrounded by inventory ranging from French doors to fans, ducts and mantelpieces, Schulman says he greets customers, who include a senator's aide in search of bricks, and a Latino immigrant, who came and left on foot, four two-by-fours hoisted over his shoulder.

"It's incumbent on us as Jewish environmentalists to inhibit the extraction and manufacture of products that we really don't need," Schulman says.

That's why he's working with other members of Temple Micah to help the Reform congregation factor energy efficiency and other green concerns into its building expansion.

Also involved in this effort is fellow congregant Alan Cohen, who a decade ago hatched his own green business, Bethesda-based Biological Pest Management, which uses pheromone traps for pantry moths, boric acid for ants and a special vacuum for ground nests of yellow jackets.

Cohen's client list, he says, encompasses households, businesses and synagogues. Indeed, his professional expertise, he notes, "allowed a family to come back to services" at Columbia's Beth Shalom Congregation.

A chemically sensitive family member had not been able to tolerate the indoor spraying for insects carried out at the Conservative synagogue, he says, until Cohen found alternative solutions to ant problems there.

The District man first encountered what people in the field call integrated pest management in Israel during a 1974 stay at Kibbutz Ma'ayan Zvi, south of Haifa. There, the kibbutzniks were growing cotton without using the typical insecticides.

Cohen would go on to study with integrated pest management pioneer Robert Metcalf at the University of Illinois, where he received a bachelor of science degree in agriculture.

Later, as a specialist at the Environmental Protection Agency, he focused on farmworker occupational safety, learning about the health damage wrought by a class of insecticides (organophosphates) invented, in what he finds an ironic twist, by Nazi scientists.

Cohen went on to work with Beyond Pesticides, a nonprofit advocacy group, and for the past 10 years, has been bent on bringing IPM to the area grassroots.

He sees most pest eradicators as stuck in a 1950s model of baseboard spraying, rather than using less toxic techniques for insect removal.

"You don't have to have ants or cockroaches < and you don't have to poison your pets, children or yourself," Cohen says. "There are smarter ways to deal with things."

Environmentally minded businesses are becoming more than mom-and-pop shops, as evidenced by a turn toward the green taken in the mid-1990s by the Tower Companies, builder of such landmarks as White Flint Mall.

David Borhardt, a senior project manager at the Bethesda construction firm, describes the change of attitude at Tower, founded in 1947 by the Abramson family, which has supported such Jewish causes as the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington, Greater Washington Jewish Community Foundation, Tel Aviv University and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

"There was a realization by the ownership that buildings use 40 percent of energy" between construction and heating and cooling, so "stewardship toward the environment" became a priority.

So much so that Tower constructed the first multifamily building, LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design), certified by the Green Business Council. The Blair Towns, a set of ordinary-looking rentals near downtown Silver Spring, boast special insulation, energy-efficient heating and cooling, water efficient plumbing and native plantings that minimize watering.

"You can do this for synagogues, for any building," Borchardt says of such environmentally friendly features.

His firm is working on another green edifice, this time an office building, for 2000 Tower Oaks Blvd. in Rockville.

"It's good for the environment, it's good for the pocketbook; it's good for the world," says Borchardt of such projects. Costs may run 1 to 2 percent above conventional designs, he argues, but can be earned back in energy savings within two years.

Then there's Bethesda's Seth Goldman, who turned a "longstanding entrepreneurial itch" into a \$12 million business in organic bottled drinks. When he launched Honest Tea in 1998, Goldman had been working in marketing for the investment firm, the Calvert Group, known for its socially screened mutual funds.

"With organics, we're talking about fewer pesticides going into the ecosystem, into the bodies of people picking the tea leaves and, of course, the bodies of people drinking the tea," Goldman says.

With his initially small-scale venture, he was following in the footsteps of his immigrant grandfathers, both small business owners (one of them in beverage distribution), albeit with the boost of a Yale MBA.

For this member of Bethesda's Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation, though, the values undergirding his business remain crucial. He donates drinks to various philanthropic causes and underwrites a computer center for children in India's Darjeeling region, a source of tea for his company.

"The term tzedakah is often associated with charity, but it's really about righteousness and doing something that has a moral direction," Goldman says. "We're trying to create an honest relationship with the earth, with our customers and the people who produce the tea."

For her part, Rome leads trips throughout Latin America, from the teeming rain forests of Costa Rica to the mountainside cloud forests of Ecuador to bird habitats in avian-rich Cuba, which boasts the globe's smallest bird, the bee hummingbird, weighing less than a penny.

She takes people to such exotic spots with the goal of helping preserve them through boosting the local economy in ways that sustain, rather than destroy, natural habitats.

"It's a feel-good activity, because by being an ecotourist, your dollar helps local people protect natural resources, while also supporting their families," says Rome, who partners with area lodges and other small-scale tourist ventures.

Ecotourism, she explains, aims to raise awareness and strengthen conservation as it provides local residents and professionals like Rome with a venturesome living.

Raised as a Reconstructionist Jew with a family that observed Shabbat and holidays in New York's Westchester County, she recalls "nature walks every weekend" with her painter father.

Though unaffiliated now, Rome sees a Jewish angle to her ecotourist enterprise.

"One of the wonderful things about Judaism is that it does encourage people to question and look at issues from all angles and adapt practices to current realities," Rome said. "We need to do that in relation to how we live in balance with the rest of the natural world."

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