



November 2015 Sustainability Hero Lori Braunstein, Looking for Change in all the Right Places

Why does Cherry Hill Township always seem to be two steps ahead of the rest of the state in its progress with sustainability initiatives? If you ask around, you will find it is due to the vision, energy and skill of one unassuming resident named Lori Braunstein. Lori is a true sustainability hero, having made a tremendous impact through her work with Cherry Hill Township, Cherry Hill School District and green teams across New Jersey.

The founder of the non-profit Sustainable Cherry Hill and former Director for Green Schools at the Delaware Valley Green Building Council, Lori also helps civic-minded organizations with strategic planning and capacity building through MaGa Strategies, LLC, with partner Natalie Barney.

She is a skillful network builder who prefers to empower people rather than direct them. A proven community organizer, she relies on positive messaging and relationship building to engage people. "My style is to give people a vision as to why something is important," Lori says. "Then they can figure out how best to move forward given their own unique talents and situation."



Lori has lived in Cherry Hill her whole life. Her parents moved to the area when it was primarily farmlands and raised Lori and her brother with an emphasis on community service. Located in Camden County, Cherry Hill currently has a population of 71,045 and is now South Jersey's economic center.

Other than taking home one too many stray dogs as a kid, Lori did not grow up with a huge passion for green causes. After graduating from Cherry Hill East High School, she got a BS in Communication Disorders from Syracuse University and an MA in Speech Language Pathology from George Washington University. It was not until she was a parent that her focus changed.

"I first got interested in sustainability as a mother with an eye toward my children's future," Lori said. She put her speech therapy career on hold to stay home with her two children and became aware of the issue of climate change. "In the beginning, I really knew nothing; I was just a concerned citizen. I couldn't sleep thinking, 'How will I explain to my future grandchildren that I did nothing about it?'" she recalls.



Sustainable Cherry Hill (SCH)

Lori founded the all-volunteer nonprofit [Sustainable Cherry Hill](#) in 2008 and went on to guide and support the priorities and programming of the organization for the next seven years. Sustainable Cherry Hill is now a model for green teams across the state. The unique, collaborative relationship between Sustainable Cherry Hill and Cherry Hill Township resulted in Cherry Hill becoming one of the first Sustainable Jersey certified communities in November of 2009; the township also received the Sustainable Jersey Creativity and Innovation Award for its RecycleBank program.

The Cherry Hill Green Team, made up of township staff and community members, continues to meet regularly and received the municipal Sustainable Jersey certification at the silver-level in November of 2011 and again in 2014. Lori also worked at the county level and supported the creation of [Plan 2018](#), Camden County's first long range sustainability plan.

Lori is an alumna of the Cloud Institute for Sustainability Education's NJ Learns and LaSalle Non-Profit Center's Certificate Programs, a 2010 Environmental Leadership Program (ELP) Fellow, and is credentialed as a LEED Green Associate. She was named as U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC) "Best of Green Schools" Ambassador in 2013 and received the National Association for Women Business Owners' Glass Ceiling Award for Environmental Advocate of the Year in 2014.

Lori, an experienced group facilitator, has mentored dozens of green teams and schools throughout the region. In 2010, Lori developed a pilot program for Sustainable Jersey and worked as a mentor to ten South Jersey towns, helping with their sustainability initiatives. She also co-founded the large scale Tri-State Sustainability Symposium, along with her friend, Brad Molotsky. The Symposium, now hosted by DVGBC, draws more than 125 speakers and over 800 attendees. Lori recently led a collaborative effort to create the [Pennsylvania Green & Healthy Schools Partnership](#) and supported the creation of Green Futures, the School District of Philadelphia's soon to be released sustainability management plan. She also sits on the Board of The NJ Tree Foundation.

19 Cherry Hill Schools Achieve Sustainable Jersey for Schools Certification

In 2013, in her role with Sustainable Cherry Hill, Lori and the Cherry Hill School District developed a three-year Sustainability Plan.

The [Cherry Hill Public Schools](#) serve students in pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade. The district's nineteen schools have an enrollment of about 11,248 students. It is the twelfth-largest school district in the state of New Jersey and one of the largest suburban districts. "The move to tackle education was a natural next step for Sustainable Cherry Hill. Educating for sustainability broadens the lens through which we look at how the decisions we make and the actions we take impact the world around us," Lori said.



In 2014, the Cherry Hill superintendent asked Lori to a meeting and the new Sustainable Jersey for Schools brochure was sitting on the table. Lori and the superintendent agreed that the Sustainable Jersey for Schools program provided the perfect framework to move their sustainability plan forward. Lori was empowered to reach out to all nineteen schools in the district in order to get them started on the certification program.

Lori noted, "Sustainable Jersey allowed us all to start rowing in the same direction, use a common language and work toward a shared mission of certification. The program brought us together and kept us driving forward." She did whatever it took to move the process ahead, including meeting regularly with the superintendent and administrators, rallying the principals, working with the business office and the school vendors and meeting regularly with the students and teachers. Take a look at the presentation that the district prepared in May 2015 to share their approach and progress with the sustainability plan: [Cherry Hill Public Schools Sustainability Update](#).

In October 2015, Sustainable Jersey announced that Cherry Hill School District was the recipient of the 2015 Sustainable Jersey for Schools' Leadership Award. The award recognizes district leadership in coordinating the work of multiple schools and enabling all of the schools in the district to achieve Sustainable Jersey for Schools certification in the first year to the program.

Dr. Joseph Meloche, the Superintendent of Cherry Hill public schools said, “With her knowledge about and commitment to sustainability, Lori has been a tremendous resource to us in the Cherry Hill Public Schools. We are fortunate to count her as an ongoing friend of the district.”

You can review all of the Sustainable Jersey for Schools Certification Reports on the [website](#). Here are three of the nineteen certification reports from the Cherry Hill Schools: [Bret Harte Elementary School](#), [Henry C. Beck Middle School](#) and [Cherry Hill West](#).

When asked if she prefers the municipal certification to the schools’ certification program, Lori confessed, “I love



working with young people because sometimes adults are set in their ways and find it harder to make changes. We have children in school for thirteen years, so it is a tremendous opportunity to provide them with transformative learning experiences in green and healthy spaces that will enable them to help us make the shift to a sustainable future.”

Strong school district support definitely helps in the certification process. Lori revealed, “I was able to help move the nineteen schools to achieve certification because they wanted to move forward. All of the schools were at different levels, but the momentum to make changes and move toward sustainability was already in place.” She added, “Cherry Hill School District was successful because the program was embraced at the district level. The direction for schools to

participate came from the top. The District realized that sustainability actions connect to many of the other school priorities; they did not participate just to save money but understood it was the responsible thing to do.”

Coming Full Circle, the Next Frontier

Lori’s latest professional evolution in sustainability is to join her mentor, Jaime P. Cloud, at [The Cloud Institute](#) as the new Director of Organizational Learning.

Jaime Cloud, a thought leader in the field of Education for Sustainability and the director of The Cloud Institute worked with Lori in developing the Cherry Hill Public Schools Sustainability Plan. Jaime had this to say about Lori, “Lori brings humility and sophistication to the work she does. She consciously embraces the principles of sustainability and knows how to weave the interests and perspectives of school and community stakeholders into partnerships that preserve and transform in all the right places. I am excited about the difference we can make together.”

Lori credits her early participation in Cloud’s NJ Learns leadership development training as the foundation for her years of sustainability work. “The idea of working together now is like coming full circle. I began this work with little knowledge, vocabulary or a framework for engaging with my community around sustainability,” she explains. “Jaimie provided that for me then and has remained a consistent influence over the past seven years.”

In her free time, Lori enjoys hiking with her dog, Oliver, who is a Newfoundland mix, traveling but never the same place twice, spending time in nature and vegan cooking. Lori and her husband, Elliot, have two children, a daughter named Devon who is working in New York City as a consultant and a son named Jack who is a junior at University of Vermont. He is majoring in natural resource planning and geography. Lori is proud that both children understand and value the sustainability issues that mean so much to her.

New Jersey is a better place thanks to Lori. She is preparing Cherry Hill’s youth for a changing world and inspiring those around her to work harder to make sure we can all look our kids in the eye and say we did everything we could to make the world a better place.