**Interview with Anya Schoolman**

*Anya Schoolman is a founder of the Mt. Pleasant Solar Cooperative in Washington, D.C. [more?]*

**Is it true that you started the Mt. Pleasant co-op with your 12-year-old son? How did it all come about?**

Yes, when my son, Walter was 12 he and his best friend Diego went to see Al Gore’s *Inconvenient Truth.* When they came back they were upset. We talked about going solar. However, when we looked into it we found it was really expensive and confusing. We had a vague idea that if we got enough people to go solar at once we could bring down the costs. I told the boys if we are going to go solar—it was too much work and too expensive to just figure it out for our house. So, they started putting together flyers asking neighbors if they were interested in joining the Mt Pleasant Solar Coop. Pretty soon we had 50 members and no idea what to do next!

At the time, my son was also looking for a community service project required by our Synagogue as part of his Bar Mitzvah. It is called Tikkun Olam –heal the world. So while we were figuring out how to go solar, Walter developed a project to buy $3,000 of compact fluorescent lightbulbs whole sale and re-sell them at cost to members of our Coop. It turned out to be a great way to launch the Coop because we had a tangible action to take from the very building. It was a great way to get to know our neighbors and find more volunteers to work on the Coop.

**Did you encounter resistance when you first started? What kinds of obstacles have you had to overcome?**

I think what surprised us most was how much support we encountered from the very beginning from all kinds of people. We live in a culturally diverse and economically diverse neighborhood and we have strong support from across the spectrum. Many many people helped us and supported us. We quickly grew to several hundred households and members donated time and also found us free services for a website, pro-bono legal counsel, meeting spaces, technical evaluations, hosting events, videos, lobbying, on-line advocacy, press and outreach. Our membership is our best resource and our source of political strength as well.

There are lots of obstacles. First of all energy regulation is very complicated and it is not an area accustomed to having common citizens involved. We had a steep learning curve. Our utility has been very un supportive. Perhaps one of the hardest things is that it is hard to sustain this kind of effort. Our greatest strength is our membership, yet sometimes it is too much work to realistically sustain as a volunteer project.

**There must have been a lot of hard work involved over a long period. Were there times when everyone wanted to quit? How did you keep yourself and the group motivated over several years of effort?**

For me personally, it was really hard to quit because of the kids. I felt like I needed to show them that starting things is easy, but finishing them is the tough part. That personal commitment is what keeps you going. Now I keep it up because we have had a lot of success and I want to see it scaled and expanded across DC. Right now 10 percent of our neighborhood has gone solar. We would like to see 30% of DC solar in the near term!

I am now building a national network to connect groups like my own across the US. The idea is to share experiences, resources, and information. And ultimately to join together to get reform and policy changes. The new organization is called the Community Power Network.

**Was it hard to work with your neighbors?  What have you learned about organizing from this experience?**

I love organizing. I think it is backwards that in the environmental movement organizers are paid so little and policy people make good money. We can’t get the good policy without building the power first. Also, it is unlikely the policy will be good—if it isn’t linked to real world grass roots practical needs and concerns. There is no silver bullet!

First of all, on-line organizing isn’t organizing. The internet provides a set of tools that can help you but real organizing is about building real relationships with real people. It is about building trust and mutual support. It is very important to figure out what other people want and why they want it, NOT to try to get them to see the world in your way or to convince them to do something that you want them to do. We have found people who are anchors in their community and they have added solar and climate change to the long list of issues they work on. These folks are the head of the local PTA, active in their church, active in local planning efforts, active in election and so forth.

Leave your computer behind, go out meet real people talk to them and listen to them.

**What advice do you have for other communities looking to set up solar coops?**

There are many different approaches that have been successful. It depends on the people in your community, the physical lay-out of the buildings and houses and it depends on the State you live in and the incentives in place and the cost of energy. With the Community Power Network we are bringing together examples of all these different approaches so you can learn from them and pick the unique hybrid that works for your community.

In some neighborhoods a do it yourself “Solar Raiser” model—like a barn raising model has worked. Here folks literally get together and help each other install solar systems. In other communities a group purchase or collective action to pass legislation is the key to making things work. In still other communities—for example where most of the folks live in shady houses—people have developed community solar installations or “solar gardens” so they can own solar on a school or community center—somewhere nearby.

People can email me at [Solarcoop@yahoo.com](mailto:Solarcoop@yahoo.com) for more information and advice. Also, there is a great website where you can research all of the incentives in your state or county: <http://www.dsireusa.org/>

**What types of policy changes would you like to see at the local and federal level to get solar co-ops the support they deserve?**

Well, there are a lot of different type of policy changes that could make a big difference. At the Federal level extending the existing 30% grant that goes to private companies that go solar to non-profits would help thousands of churches and schools to go solar. The credits that are currently available to homeowners should be allowed even if the solar panel is not placed directly on the homeowner’s own roof or property. Obviously, if our country had a long term energy and climate policy that would make a big difference. Having national renewable portfolio requirements for example would be a good start.

On the state level, there is no limit to the types of creative ideas that can be developed. We have helped pass legislation that requires a percentage of our energy to come from solar. We also levy a small surcharge on everyone’s electric bill that goes to a sustainable energy trust fund to help pay for solar grants. We are fast approaching the day when solar won’t need any subsidies, but in the meantime, we need to do everything we can to help spur momentum and create a pathway for large scale deployment.

There are also a lot of impediments to going solar that communities can band together and address. Often the permitting rules discriminate against solar, homeowners associations discourage solar or the utitlity does not have fair rules allowing interconnection and net metering. This is going to be a long process and we need as many groups engaged in knocking down the barriers as possible.

**What is your vision for the project in the coming years? Are you optimistic about the direction that community-based solar is headed in the United States?**

Community based solar is inevitable. Despite the fact that most government incentives are focused on industrial scale solar—the greatest deployment is still in distributed generation. It makes sense to homeowners who want to get a handle on sky rocketing energy costs to go solar. It makes sense to generate electricity right where you need it, not transmit it across highly inefficient and unsightly transmission lines. Most people are so frustrated with their national and local government that they are taking matters in their own hands. Community owned energy is one glorious example of that populist discontent.