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Green revolution comes to urban neighborhoods

Low-income can also be environmentally friendly, with a little help.



An East Los Angeles home gets some eco-friendly improvements from a team from the LA Conservation Corps, which trains young adults for green jobs such as installing solar panels. (Mariah Tauger, Los Angeles Times / July 28, 2010)

By Tiffany Hsu, Los Angeles Times

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Kendrick Harris, a high school dropout who has been homeless and jobless, has had more pressing things to worry about than the environment.

But in the last year the 22-year-old South Los Angeles resident has planted community gardens, cleaned up abandoned industrial sites and learned how to install solar panels.

"Not knowing where I was going to sleep at night, the last thing in my head was going green," Harris said recently as he helped weatherize a 75-year-old stucco home near Lincoln Heights. "It was never something that was taught and it was never something that I did."

Harris is one of 200 local residents taking part in an innovative program designed to help bridge a green divide. Many residents of low-income neighborhoods say they've been left out of the environmental movement and that clean-tech businesses are avoiding urban neighborhoods while

they pitch green advances elsewhere.

"There's a tendency to not seek out communities like these," said Jeffrey Richardson, chief executive of solar installer Imani Energy Inc., one of the few companies that have been actively working on projects in South Los Angeles. "There's the idea that people here don't get it, don't want to get it and can't get it when it comes to green."

That frustration has given rise to an "environmental justice" movement encouraging homegrown, grass-roots industry.

There have been some successes in recent years. Green roofs and urban gardens have started to bloom on dilapidated buildings and parking lots across the country. In South Los Angeles, blighted sites such as an old bus maintenance yard are being converted into urban wetland parks.

But "greening the ghetto," as some advocates call it, has sometimes been a tough sell.

Billboards touting hybrid cars and stores selling energy-efficient appliances are a rarity in neighborhoods such as Compton or Watts, said Prachel K. Carter, director of marketing firm Soulstice, which runs workshops on environmentally friendly living in low-income areas.

"The advertising is not there," she said. "Anything having to do with conscious living, conservation, organic food — it doesn't feature these residents and it isn't geared toward them. It's easier to find a bag of Cheetos in some places than it is to find a tomato."

By not installing energy-efficient appliances and insulating walls and roofs in low-income public housing, the federal government adds an extra \$1 billion a year in utility costs to poor families and taxpayers, according to a recent report from the National Consumer Law Center.

And cautious investors are wary about projects in areas with tangled zoning standards, high crime rates and steep unemployment.

"We see the money moving, but not in the numbers we need," said Mary Leslie, president of the Los Angeles Business Council, an influential economic development group. Two recent UCLA studies commissioned by the council found that many Southland communities with the most rooftop space ripe for solar panels are in low-income areas.

Without exposure to green ideas and projects, resident Rhonda Glasper, 46, said she hasn't really paid much attention to becoming more eco-friendly.

The term is more of a catchphrase that conjures up vague notions of recycling, she said, though she has tried to conserve energy by turning off the air conditioning in her South Los Angeles home. But as a renter whose employer is facing tough times, she can't make or afford major energy-efficiency upgrades, she said.

"I don't know too much about green," said Glasper, a hairdresser. "But I'm willing to try anything new."

That's where education efforts and job training could sway residents to take a more active role in going green. Several local groups have begun offering programs in low-income neighborhoods with courses in plug-in vehicle technology, solar thermal installation, green building standards and more.

Last May, for instance, Harris joined the LA Conservation Corps, which started out planting trees and encouraging recycling and now trains young adults for green skills such as installing solar panels and cleaning up polluted properties while helping them earn a high school diploma. Many of those

who join — there is usually a waiting list of at least a thousand people--are high school dropouts. Others are former gang members and teen parents.

Harris, who would like to pursue a green career or get involved in oil spill clean-up efforts, is now certified to work in a power plant, remove hazardous waste and clean up asbestos.

State and federal officials are stepping up funding for similar programs. The California Clean Energy Workforce Training Program is on track to receive a \$75-million state grant, some of which will go to programs in low-income areas.

Environmentalists and the clean tech industry "don't realize that they could bring in a whole new demographic that they had never contemplated," said City Councilwoman Jan Perry, whose district covers much of South Los Angeles. "And there's everything to gain by doing that."

But these newly trained workers are having to compete against seasoned professionals in a tough job market.

"They come with a lot of baggage and have to break through the huge hurdle of preconception," said LA Conservation Corps coordinator John Medina. "It's one thing to train them, but it's another thing entirely to get them into these really tight job openings."

Past efforts to green low-income urban areas have been controversial.

MacArthur "genius" grant winner Majora Carter founded the trailblazing green-collar job training nonprofit program Sustainable South Bronx in 2001 but sparked criticism before the 2008 Beijing Olympics with her adamant support for Tibetan independence.

Van Jones was appointed in 2009 as a high-profile advisor to the Obama administration on green jobs but resigned within months, blaming a "vicious smear campaign" by conservatives. Jones, founder of the advocacy group Green for All, has pushed for more eco-minded jobs as a stepping stone out of poverty.

One project getting attention from local green advocates is

United We Can, which runs a recycling center near Vancouver's Strathcona neighborhood, one of Canada's poorest. It was founded in 1995 by Ken Lyotier, who was once a Dumpster-diving alcoholic known as the King of Binnars before he launched the nonprofit group.

The warehouse handles 20 million containers a year and employs about 150 low-income residents, including some former fishermen and loggers suffering from addiction or mental illness. The group also trains locals to fix bicycles, recycle or refurbish old computers and grow produce for sale in a nearby urban garden.

"The future's going to be about retrofitting communities," said Toby Barazzuol, a business improvement advocate in Vancouver who has worked with Lyotier's group.

To that end, L.A. is inching along with an ambitious project to turn a rundown industrial area straddling the Los Angeles River into a so-called CleanTech Corridor. Officials hope the project will draw jobs and green businesses.

Imani Energy could be one of those businesses. But so far the company has struggled to make a profit with the difficult economy. And then there was the torrential rain that put a damper on the company's unveiling of new solar panels on a transition home for recently incarcerated women a few months ago.

Richardson is hoping for a more auspicious start to the next project: a planned 25,000-square-foot Imani factory in South Los Angeles that would hire local workers to produce crystalline photovoltaic energy cells.

"The potential in this area is huge," he said. "We have to dream big."

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