

20 green groups in 10 years

‘Go Green Illinois’ expands environmental work in the suburbs



Half Day School Principal Michelle Blackley, left, and Go Green Vernon Hills-Lincolnshire founder Seema Keshav pose at the launch of the elementary school’s zero-waste program. (COURTESY OF SEEMA KESHAV)

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BY JENNY WHIDDEN (jwhidden@dailyherald.com)

While volunteering at her daughter's school in Lincolnshire in 2019, Seema Keshav noticed the uneaten food that was getting sent to the landfill each day.

Having grown up in the Middle East, where scarcity was prevalent, Keshav said she was raised to always finish her plate, buy only what she needed and never let the water run for longer than necessary.

“We grew up with the idea that waste is not good for your family. It's not good for the community. It's not good for anybody,” she said. “I think that's stuck with me for a long time. I know that my dad would say, ‘If you don't respect what's been given to you, by God and by nature, it can be taken away from you.’”

Driven to do something about the food waste at her daughter's school, Keshav turned to a local environmental group.

Volunteer-based Go Green Illinois came to life 10 years ago, and has since expanded to more than 20 local “Go Green” organizations across the suburbs, such as Go Green Northbrook and Go Green Arlington Heights.

Keshav connected with groups that had helped implement food waste programs in their schools — such as districts in Highland Park and Evanston — and even toured the schools along with her district superintendent, whom she invited. She initiated a food waste audit, through which they found her daughter's school had about 100 pounds of food waste each day.

As she worked on the issue, Keshav ended up founding Go Green Vernon Hills–Lincolnshire. Since then, the group has helped put a composting program in place at all three schools in Lincolnshire–Prairie View School District 103, as well as residential food waste pickup for both municipalities. Lincolnshire began offering the curbside program in 2020, and Vernon Hills followed in 2022.

“We're now diverting all of that food waste away from the landfill, as well as recycling whatever we can recycle from the schools. That's essentially how we got started,” she said.

The Go Green Illinois network was instrumental in showing Keshav what other communities are doing and what the possibilities are for being more environmentally sustainable in her own community, she said.

“I feel like the amount of support and resources that (Go Green Illinois) provides the communities is at a different level,” Keshav said. “Having that kind of organization that keeps inching each one of us forward in terms of making an impact in our community, I think it’s amazing.”

The organization as a whole operates as a loose affiliation of smaller groups, sharing information, ideas, challenges and successes. They collaborate among one another or as a larger regional coalition when necessary — helping each other make small-scale action more impactful.

On their own, the groups take on a myriad of hyperlocal environmental projects, like advocating for municipal sustainability employees, organizing clothing swap events and hosting educational meetings about everything from waste reduction to electric vehicles.

“Our mission is really to help with collaboration and providing information so that environmental groups can be more effective at the local level,” Go Green Illinois co-facilitator Kim Stone said. “There’s a lot of action that can take place at the local level that can have a big environmental benefit, but if you’re working on the local level and you’re working alone, it’s not very effective. Or, sometimes it is, but not always.”

Stone, also on the city council in Highland Park, founded the organization in 2013 alongside Go Green Wilmette President Beth Drucker. Drucker had formed the Wilmette group seven years earlier and collaborated with Stone to expand Go Green to other communities.

“I feel like the environmental community in our region has really grown, and I hope that we are a part of why,” said Stone, who also serves on the national advisory board for the Union of Concerned Scientists. “I think it’s been really helpful to a lot of these groups to have a structure to go to in Illinois, to be able to talk with and interact with their counterparts and other communities.”

The groups come together every other month to update each other, exchange information and hear from experts on various environmental issues. The gatherings vary in programming and are often guided by what is most timely and seasonal, such as featuring sustainable lawn practices in the spring.

Most recently, the bimonthly meeting featured local, regional and national speakers on school sustainability, exploring topics like electric school buses, solar opportunities for school buildings, and how to advocate for the hiring of sustainability coordinators in schools.

While the meetings have gone digital in recent years, the transition to Zoom has helped extend the organization's reach from its base in the Northwest suburbs outward to towns like Glen Ellyn and LaGrange.

While Keshav is proud of what Go Green Vernon Hills–Lincolnshire has accomplished in the past four years, she said there is more work to be done — particularly in plastic reduction — and she welcomes new members.

“I strongly feel that it’s very important to have people at the local level that are able to implement policies and changes,” she said. “With the composting and recycling program at the school district, it was me — one parent running around — trying to gather people to say, ‘OK, this is something we need to do,’ I feel like there are not enough people that are pushing for that at a local level. If you don’t, you have to wait for policy change to happen, and as we all know, sometimes policy just takes way too long.”

A directory of “Go Green” groups, along with related local environmental organizations, can be found at gogreenillinois.org/members.

- Jenny Whidden is a Report For America corps member covering climate change and the environment for the Daily Herald. To help support her work with a tax-deductible donation, see dailyherald.com/rfa.