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*Bloom Where You're Planted*

In 2007, my friend Renee invited me to attend a screening of *The 11th Hour*, Leonardo DiCaprio's documentary about the environmental challenges facing our planet today. The film left a lasting impression upon us—not just the scientific evidence presented (this we were familiar with), but the way in which it challenged us to take more responsibility in our community. We wondered aloud what we could do to make a difference in Indianapolis, a city that, despite its many redeeming qualities, had a long way to go in terms of environmental progress.

Individually, Renee and I were already pretty green. Growing up, my parents taught my siblings and me to respect nature by letting us experience it firsthand, both in Indiana and in Colorado, where we spent many happy summers on vacation. We swam in lakes, hiked in canyons, rode horses up steep mountain trails, paddled down rushing rivers, and took our binoculars outside at dusk to spot deer and elk grazing on a late dinner. It became apparent to me at an early age that every living thing serves an important purpose, from the mighty sequoia tree to the lowly lichen. In grade school, as I learned about terms like “greenhouse gases” and “endangered species,” my compassion for the planet grew. I wore T-shirts with sayings like “When You Buy Ivory, Someone Else Pays” and wrote letters to a large chemical company asking it to manufacture its sandwich bags from recycled plastic. My small attempts at activism didn't start a revolution, but they did make a statement. As I grew older, I began to realize that every little bit really does help.

I recycled religiously, ate locally and organically grown food, practiced energy-saving habits at home, and made efforts to reduce air pollution by biking, riding the bus, or carpooling whenever possible. But I realized I wasn't the norm in Indiana, which ranked 49th on Forbes.com's “America's Greenest States” list. Our state had the sixth highest carbon footprint of any state, and four of our metro areas had serious smog problems. There is plenty of room to debate why Indiana lags so far behind other states' environmental progress. Some would say our traditionally conservative politics make us less environmentally progressive. Others blame the lack of public transportation. But I contend that going green, like so many learned values, begins with education. When you teach your children to turn off the water while brushing their teeth, it becomes a habit.

Together, Renee and I crafted a simple idea: We would combine my writing skills with her marketing background to create a virtual place—a free, twice-weekly e-mail containing tips for how to live a greener lifestyle in Indianapolis. We borrowed the format from a successful national green e-mail and called ourselves Green Piece Indy. On January 1, 2008, we e-mailed our first tip to 200 of our friends, colleagues, and relatives. Little by little, word began to spread about Green Piece Indy, as subscribers eagerly forwarded their tips to others they thought would be interested in knowing where to recycle Christmas trees or drink locally brewed beer.

Soon, subscribers started submitting tip ideas, media relations folks sent press releases detailing their clients' green business initiatives, and community groups asked us to speak at their events. As Earth Day 2009 drew near, a local television station approached us about doing a segment on recycling, which appeared on its evening newscast. Renee and I don't bill ourselves as environmental experts or green saints. We understand that doing everything perfectly for the planet can be time-consuming and even overwhelming, so we encourage small, easy-to-incorporate changes. The point is to try one new thing and make it a habit. If that works, try another. Transformation doesn't happen overnight, but if everyone commits to making a small change, it adds up to big results.

Today, with more than 2,500 subscribers, Green Piece Indy has evolved to include Earth Hour parties, Green Savings Indy coupon books, and Rush Hour Recycling events that encourage electronics and cardboard recycling. Somewhere along the way, our little e-mail grew into something bigger and more important than we ever imagined. We've become a place people turn to for green advice, ideas, and inspiration. With growth, of course, comes lessons learned. When I think back to that letter I wrote to the chemical company as a middle school student, I marvel at what I now understand about the power of a single voice. Today, I know that I can't take on large multinational corporations on my own. But I've figured out a way to use my writing ability to make an important difference in my community; in the lives of people near to my heart and some I may never even meet.