

Extreme Green Makeovers

CarbonFreeDC Assists Shaw Homeowners in Going Green

BY AMANDA ABRAMS

Elmer Rones' living room is full, completely full, of chattering people in matching T-shirts, and he seems to be enjoying himself as much as anyone.

Which is not surprising, since Rones is one of ten Shaw homeowners who's getting an "Extreme Green Makeover," courtesy of a new nonprofit organization, CarbonFreeDC (www.carbonfreedc.org). What that means is that a gaggle of volunteers comes into his house several times over the course of a few months to assess his energy use and figure out how he can cut it down. And, not least, help him save a pile of money on his power bill. No wonder Rones is smiling.

The project is based on a simple premise: spend about \$1,000 per household to help people reduce their energy use and bills by 20-30 percent, and prove that small investments in energy efficiency can reap huge long-term rewards, even for low-income households.

Rhys Gerholdt, CarbonFreeDC's founder and director, explained the process. The first step in the project, he said, was to choose two neighborhoods in the District. "We advertised the program by promoting it with community groups, asking them to nominate their neighborhoods," he said. Along with Deanwood, in northeast DC, Shaw was chosen because of its diversity: some areas are fairly well off, while others are lower income.

The next step was finding low-income homeowners interested in participating. Although CarbonFreeDC staff visited neighborhood events and went door-to-door, it turned out to be a surprisingly difficult task; many residents were skeptical that "free" really meant free. Even Rones was doubtful at first.

"A young man was walking down the street, talking about [the project], and I was like, 'Ok, ok, how much is this?'" explained Rones. "He said, 'Would you like to sign up? We're help-



Elmer Rones, in red t-shirt, stands with the CarbonFreeDC staff and volunteers in front of his Shaw home. Photo: Amanda Abrams

ing people.' I said 'Yeah, but if you start getting me to sign a contract, I'm on a budget.' He said 'No, no, it's all free.' So I said ok."

It's all free because CarbonFreeDC was recently awarded a \$20,000 grant from National Geographic and Sun Chips, funds that will be used to equip each house with energy-saving devices. So after the ten Shaw families were chosen, Gerholdt and his colleagues visited each home and did an eco-audit, examining how the households could save money by altering their behavior and making a few small changes to the home.

That's what the horde of volunteers at Rones' house were recently engaged in: doing small things like weather-

stripping and caulking that can add up to big savings. Helping the households is a learning experience for the volunteers too, Gerholdt pointed out. The organization has recruited and trained 65 volunteers, many of whom heard about the group through online sites like Meetup.com and are interested in environmental issues.

Over three weekends in late September and early October, the volunteers covered all twenty homes in the program. Then more seasoned professionals visited the houses and made bigger changes, adding features like low-flow showerheads, insulation, and sometimes even solar panels, working with homeowners to find the best solutions for their home.

Meanwhile, CarbonFreeDC will be holding a couple of workshops in Shaw later in the fall, with the aim of educating as many people as possible about ways to reduce carbon emissions.

The organization has already succeeded in educating Elmer Rones, who was smiling at all the activity going on in his house. "I'm learning. I learned about how to save kilowatts, about caulking," he said. "I'm saying, 'Hey, where have these people been?'"

CarbonFreeDC will be holding an Extreme Green Gala in Washington on October 9. For more information, visit <http://www.carbonfreedc.org/extreme-green-gala.html>. ★