

Environmental Ed (Original Draft)

TV Dad Makes a Difference

by Blaise Nutter

I push past the clichéd white picket fence as I approach Ed Begley Jr's Laurel Canyon home. From the sidewalk, a large solar panel is visible on the roof. It's a cozy, tidy place, the front yard a heavy mix of native vegetation, with none of that silly non-draught tolerant lawn round here. There're figs, lemons, olives, a bevy of herbs – something for any time of the year.

Begley and I sit down in his living room, the walls covered in a bizarre mixture of art and foreign craft, evidence of a rich life if the background sounds of his six-year old daughter readying for school weren't enough already. Begley is quite tall (6'4"), blonde, with a curious face. He is no movie star, but he is a talented character actor that you might not be able to name but would recognize instantly from his roles in *Spinal Tap*, *Best in Show*, *A Mighty Wind*, and TV roles on *Seventh Heaven*, *St. Elsewhere*, and *Arrested Development*. This fall, he'll be appearing in two other TV shows, *Veronica Mars* and *The New Adventures of Old Christine*.

More than any film or television work, however, Begley is known in Hollywood as an environmentalist, an actor with a cause. Famous for showing up to movie premieres on a bicycle, Begley serves on the boards for a number of environmental organizations including the Coalition for Clean Air and Heal The Bay, a non-profit dedicated to cleaning up the Santa Monica Bay. A lecture could be in the offing but, thankfully, not with Begley. As it happens, he's not as interested in lecturing as he is in showing me the money he's saved by being the greenest celebrity in Tinseltown.

"All the stuff that I did, it all was good for the environment," he explains as he takes me around the property, pointing to each little (and huge) thing that he has done over the years to conserve. "But I quickly discovered that it was good for my bottom line – it put money in my pocket."

Solar panels line every southern-facing section of the roof. A large tracking dish follows the sun throughout the day, collecting its rays and converting them into usable energy. Stored in giant batteries the size of freezers in Begley's garage, it powers his electric car, the lights, the AC, everything.

"It's not that I'm a millionaire, I'm not. But I have something that's more important. I have less need for money." This won't be the last time he uses economics to prove his point. "I don't have an electric bill to speak of. I have a very low natural gas bill, since I'm heating most of my water with the sun, and the house is well insulated. I have a very reasonable water bill, [because] I grow a lot of draught-tolerant plants."

With gas prices the way they are, Begley is careful not to gloat but it's hard. "I don't spend money on any gasoline to get around LA because I've got my electric car, which is charged by the sun." And when he has to travel to a film set beyond the range of his electric car, he takes his wife's Prius. Begley even seems proud of the cost of his cars' upkeep: "The electric car is literally a zero-service vehicle. I've paid zero for maintenance in the five years I've owned it." And the Prius? "All it needs is a lube and oil change and I've owned it for six years."

He does, however, freely admit there are costs to saving the environment. "Solar energy is expensive for now, I won't suggest otherwise. But it's the apex, the pinnacle of the pyramid of possibilities." He suggests people start small: "Compact fluorescent bulbs, energy saving thermostat, the simplest stuff. Riding your bike to work. Public transportation. There so many things at the base of that pyramid that you can do first, and then you'll be saving so much money it'll be easier to afford to buy solar."

I get the feeling that some of this is said for my benefit, an attempt to make environmentalism attractive to the public. But the reasoning is solid: people won't change unless it's in their interest to do so, and Ed knows the best way to get people to take notice: appeal to their bottom line.

"I always urge people to go steadily forward and at a pace they can manage. You don't run up Mount Everest. You get to base camp, you stop, you acclimate, and then you go further."

When Begley first entered down the path of activism, he had to do the same thing. In 1979, he bought a house with his wife Ingrid with the hope to pass onto his children some sort of connection to the land. "I wanted to show my children where food comes from. It doesn't come from the Ralph's tree or the Safeway bush; it comes from the earth." By

raising them on a little land, teaching them to plant vegetables and fruits, and recycling everything they could, Begley made all these small actions feel normal. “They’ve been exposed to it for their whole lives, so it makes sense to them, not just for the environment but also for our bottom line.” Even his youngest daughter, only six, gets it. “She knows that we drive an electric car and that’s all she’s ever known. She kind of wonders why people drive cars that make smog.”

But even for Begley, being an environmental activist wasn’t without its challenges. After his divorce from Ingrid in 1990 and his two children living with their mother in Ojai, Begley threw himself into the cause and stopped driving a gasoline-powered car entirely. “My daughter, she shared with me later, saying ‘I was totally freaked out. I’m never going to see him again. Electric car can’t make it up to Ojai. My dad’s lost his mind.’” So to be honest, yes, there was a price to pay when I went onto that next level of what I do. At first, it was frightening to family members.”

Begley reflects on this time with a certain peace. He doesn’t pause or make a big deal over it. But you get the sense that the environmental cause gave him something he could fight for when he needed it most.

Today though, Begley is happily married to Rachelle, and they live in that same house with their daughter. And in a few weeks, the entire Begley family will begin filming “Living With Ed,” a reality show for the Home & Garden Television Network about, well, living with Ed. Begley sees the show as something that can be funny as well as informative. “[It will] show how we interact, the challenges we face... the disparity between me, the environmental zealot if you will, and her, the less than environmental zealot.”

He’s excited about the show, the possibility of combining entertainment with his passion for the environment. But he understands people’s reticence in seeing him as an actor with a cause. “I don’t really instigate much to be quite honest, and I think it’s more powerful that way.” He thinks people should be cautious of anyone speaking outside their field of expertise and, just as important: “Verify the facts.” He loves how the internet provides democratic access to information, so if anyone want to know the truth, they can find it online.

A little over a year ago, wanting to do more than just conserve himself and tired of going to friends with his hands out asking for donations, Begley decided to follow in the footsteps of actor/activist Paul Newman and create a line of products to raise money for charity. Begley created an all-purpose non-toxic household cleaner called Begley’s Best. With so

many chemical cleaners in the average household, Begley's Best makes a perfect replacement for parents worried about curious children: biodegradable, non-polluting, and completely child-safe. And even better, all the profit goes straight to charities: "I've given away thousands of dollars to different charities I care about, because when you're not paying any salaries, you can give it away as quick as it comes in." Begley's Best is now available at Whole Foods, Wild Oats, Lassen's, and other stores throughout the Southland area, as well as online at www.begleysbest.com.

The thing is, Begley doesn't have to do any of this. The solar panels were expensive. Taking public transit can be a pain. A child-safe product that parents can trust like Begley's Best required a big investment. But Begley sees all these things as little steps, and with enough of these little positive steps, we can reach our goals. That's the key.

He takes me outside, leading me through the front yard. His pride in his home and garden is visible. He walks through that white picket fence and explains that it, too, is recycled. Plastic. He found it online. Made from milk cartons. Just like that.

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