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Seattle families "green up" for a national TV audience

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

Where else but Seattle would "going green" make you a celebrity? Just ask the Willis and Peterson families on Seattle's Queen Anne Hill.

Competing to see which family could be the most eco-friendly, they became the stars of "Green Me Up," a home-improvement reality show on national television.

Neighbors and friends have seen the film crews and heard about the show. Now they ask for tours of their homes to see all the green changes. Clara Peterson has shown people her fancy new energy-efficient washer and dryer more times than she can count. "I've never had so many men in my laundry room," she said.

Sarah Willis added, "I feel like a mini green ambassador on Queen Anne Hill."

The rest of America will meet the Petersons and Willises tonight. "Green Me Up," an hourlong special on the DIY Network (on digital cable or via satellite), premieres at 6 p.m. and again at 10 p.m. Pacific time. Viewers can check out the green projects undertaken by each family, and will learn which family won the grand prize of a new electric car.



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Ray and Sarah and their kids Max, Stephanie and Tim. On the other side are the Petersons: Genna, Ian, Anna and parents Clara and Kris.



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Both homes added barrels to catch rainwater. Sarah Willis uses it for watering her roses.

Seattle-based Screaming Flea Productions, which produced the show, contacted community organizations last winter, seeking interested families. Clara and Kris Peterson heard about it through Queen Anne Little League. Their three children — Anna, 13, Genevieve (Genna), 12, and Ian, 10 — embraced the idea.

Soon their next-door neighbors, the Willises, came on board. Ray and Sarah Willis also have three children: Tim, 18, Stephanie, 15, and Max, 13.

How they did it

The premise: Each family chose projects to reduce their environmental impact. They had a month to complete them. The show provided each family with more than \$10,000 worth of "green" products, the services of a local contractor and assistance from one of the show's two co-hosts.

If that sounds almost too good to be true, the families had to do a lot of work themselves. Each family made more than 40 changes. Some were fairly easy, such as installing a low-flow shower head. But some projects they did on their own were exhausting.

For example, Ray Willis spent more than 10 hours taking apart and weather-sealing eight windows in their 80-year-old home. The Petersons faced an added challenge when Kris Peterson had shoulder surgery partway through the month of filming.

How it changed them

Both families said they ended up loving the experience. They got to know their neighbors better, competing in a friendly way.

Sarah Willis also said her family "got a lot closer, working as a team." Clara Peterson liked that part, too. "We did it together, as a family," she said.



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In the Peterson's backyard, is the "salad bowl," a garden project for the kids.



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For better heating efficiency, Ray Willis sealed his home's single-paned windows.

Once, just before midnight, the Petersons were all in the master bedroom, hustling to complete their cork-floor installation. Show co-host Ahmed Hassan, a regular DIY Network host from the Bay Area, was helping them. Clara laughed as she described how Hassan, apparently an expert break-dancer in his younger days, began teaching her kids how to break-dance on their new cork floor.

In a similar way, the Willis children bonded with Rachel Schindler, the show host who was paired with them. Unlike Hassan, this was Schindler's first TV hosting gig. A Seattle real-estate agent and a green-building expert, the exuberant Schindler urged the Willises to reduce their excessive clutter.

They also reconsidered their purchasing habits. "Now before we buy anything, we give it a second thought," Ray Willis said. "Is there a greener way, a better way, less wasteful?"

The show offers a multitude of examples of how to go green, since each family took a different approach. Although the Petersons' house was built in 1996, most of their appliances were old, so they focused on installing energy-efficient appliances.

The Willises already had fairly new appliances, so they selected projects aimed at insulating and sealing up their 1920s house. Adding 60 bags of insulation (made from 80 percent recycled paper) in the attic, which had no insulation before, has kept the house much warmer on cool nights, the Willises said.

Their starring roles in "Green Me Up" proved to be a powerful motivator for both families. Many of us would like to do these kinds of green home improvements, Ray Willis pointed out, "but you get into your daily routine of life, and you just don't do it." He said that making the commitment to appear on this show "forced us to make these changes."



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Honeycomb blinds add insulation and let in the daylight.



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The new cork flooring in her parents' bedroom offers nice cushioning for Genna Peterson to practice her Irish dancing.

Tom Watson, project manager for King County's Recycling and Environmental Services, writes the EcoConsumer column for the digs section in Saturday's Times. Reach him at tom.watson@metrokc.gov, 206-296-4481 or www.KCecoconsumer.com.

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Both families have learned about eco-friendly cleaning products, including some with aromatherapy. Stephanie Willis likes the one that smells like geraniums.



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A note reminds everyone to keep the Willis basement door closed (for efficient heating).



The toilets in the Peterson home were updated with dual-flush models.



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Kris Peterson likes the family's new tight-sealing attic hatch. The Willis family, next door, already owned one like it. In addition to the tight seal, a ladder folds down, and it is lockable.



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The fridge in the Peterson's home filters and chills tap water, thus eliminating the need to buy bottled water. Ian is adjusting to a new habit of filling sports bottles from the fridge before softball practice.



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Thanks to the new hot-water recirculating system, Stephanie and the rest of the

Willis family no longer waste water while waiting for it to get hot.



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A hot water recirculating system under a bathroom sink eliminated wasting water while waiting for it to get warm.



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The little electric car that the Willis family won is driven on errands in their neighborhood. It's not legal for freeway driving because it's not fast enough. Tim Willis, 18, is the only teenager old enough to drive.