

Laurence Kuhn

Better Known as

Mr. Green

By Cheryl Sternman Rule

It was two empty soda bottles that inspired Laurence Kuhn's call to action.

Two years ago, the 53-year-old single dad happened to notice two 2-liter plastic bottles, tossed casually into the trash, during an event at Noddin Elementary School in San Jose. Dismayed, Kuhn whipped out his cell phone and snapped a picture.

"That was a pivotal moment for me," he recalls.

When school reconvened in September, Kuhn brought the photo to a Home and School Club meeting and announced he was going to start a recycling program. A few months later, he donned a pair of green overalls and dove into the school dumpster – a dramatic action intended to highlight the school's shocking waste of 100 pounds of paper per day.

It also brought Kuhn a new nickname: Mr. Green.

In fact, Kuhn's green roots run deep, all the way back to the 1970s when he attended the first Earth Day and majored in environmental design at UC Santa Cruz. Today, he says, the changes at Noddin Elementary School, where his 9-year-old daughter, Natasha, attends fourth grade, have been very much a group effort.

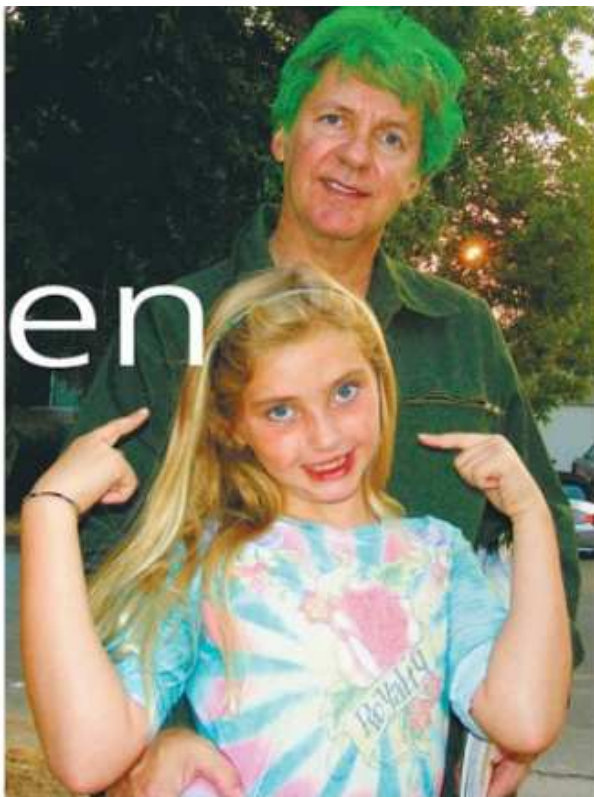
A Group Effort

Paper recycling boxes have been installed in each classroom, and every day students dump their contents into 32-gallon barrels, each set on casters, then wheel them to two

Tips for Going Green at Your School

- Measure what your school throws away.
- Develop a system that's second nature. If recycling cans are numerous, visible and accessible, students and teachers will be more likely to use them.
- Connect with your local environmental services office. Information on the City of San Jose's Go Green initiative can be found at www.sjrecycles.org/gogreen/gogreen-initiative.asp
- Ensure that students take ownership of the program – with parents and teachers playing supportive roles. The more they own, the more strongly they'll embrace change.
- Identify best practices at other schools and share information freely.

– Cheryl Sternman Rule



Nicknamed Mr. Green, Noddin Elementary School's Go Green coordinator Laurence Kuhn and daughter Natasha, 9, get ready for a school assembly.

PHOTO BY BELLA NOGALES

centralized "green zones."

"The program works because it's fun, easily understood, and can be managed by the children," Kuhn says, adding it would never work without the full cooperation of administration, teachers and custodial staff.

In September 2007, Kuhn rented a 22-foot inflatable Earth and set it up in the cafeteria. Dressed up like a tree, his hair spray-painted green (by Natasha), Kuhn invited students to step inside the giant balloon planet to learn about ways that they can take care of the environment.

Since then, Kuhn and the school's Go Green team have implemented a bottles and cans recycling program. Noddin has been awarded a \$2,300 grant from the City of San Jose to develop a waste-free lunch program; acquired corn-and-potato-based compostable plates and utensils; and been recognized by San Jose Mayor Chuck Reed for its accomplishments.

Kuhn, for his part, has joined the city's Green Advisory Group and the U.S. Green Building Council.

Most meaningful to him, however, is setting a positive example for his daughter, who has accompanied him to environmental conventions and award ceremonies, picking up awards on her school's behalf.

"Many parents may not realize the bonding that takes place when your child is involved in some volunteer experience with you," Kuhn says. "They respect that you're trying to do something to make a change." ♦

Cheryl Sternman Rule is a frequent contributor to *Bay Area Parent*.