

OC NEWS Feature



Renewable Energy of Plum Hollow

Heart to Hearth from the hearth and solar specialists

By Catherine **Stutt**
OCNews Staff

Folks in Plum Hollow have long known that resource management includes planning and responsible consumption. The historical hamlet northeast of the village of Athens in the St. Lawrence Valley, founded by pioneers in the early 1800s, is peppered with legends of

ghosts and witches. Two of its legendary figures, though, are firmly rooted in reality, and are using a new twist on old techniques to deliver sustainable energy and resource conservation technology. They are sharing the wisdom garnered in the small crossroads to communities throughout east-



ern Ontario. The small enterprise that started in the old Plum Hollow Cheese Factory has evolved into a national leader in responsible home heating solutions. As the energy crisis of the mid-1970s impacted beyond the pumps, the paradigm shifted on home heating fuels. Con-

sumers quickly realized that furnace oil came from the same oil fields as car gas, and demanded alternate solutions. Chuck Gobel heard the call and began selling woodstoves to customers throughout the St. Lawrence Valley. Chuck sold woodstoves exclusively until one day

Renewable Energy of Plum Hollow

he came upon a newly invented stove fuelled by compressed sawdust pellets. Chuck recognized that the pellet stove addressed many of the limitations of the traditional woodstove. Pellets provided lots of heat, burned cleanly and efficiently, and converted what was generally a waste product into fuel.

Instead of harvesting trees for firewood, pellet stoves used sawdust created by milling lumber. The pellets, however, were sometimes difficult to find in Ontario, since the mills were mostly in Quebec. To address this, Chuck brought in a friend, Ross Rowat, as a partner and they began selling both the stoves and the pellets.

"Renewable Energy of Plum Hollow began in the early 1990s, when Ross and Chuck banded together, and purchased the old cheese factory in Plum Hollow," explains Brad Leonard, who with Dan Creighton is now a



full partner in the company. "Chuck and Ross sold primarily pellet stoves and solar equipment."

Chuck remains true to his roots, and is living his passion. He is building an off-grid home north of Kingston with his partner Carolyn, and continues to espouse the virtues of solar technology, trying to convince people that acting later is not going to work.

"Fossil fuels are finite resources," he states passionately. "People have the choice of complaining or making an investment in their energy independence. If they choose not to invest, then they are simply victims of the energy suppliers. There is no such thing as no-impact technology; we're just choosing low impact and appropriate solutions. We need to be more responsible about our options."

Chuck has spent years developing an introduction to the technology where customers can enter the solar spectrum at their own pace, choosing a hybrid mixture of grid-dependent and solar, or, like many customers, take the plunge, and take control of their energy needs. Customers like it because they can start with a smaller investment and make energy improvements to lessen their dependence on the grid. They can add solar modules as they can afford it and grid costs increase. Along the way, they can invoke conservation measures and augment their autonomy."

Chuck is perplexed that not everyone has embraced fluorescent lighting, citing that it is so much easier and more cost

effective to conserve than to produce new energy.

He also sees the dearth of government leadership as a factor in the complacent attitudes of North Americans. "Many countries, including the European Union, are taking a proactive approach, making it easier for people to convert to alternative energy sources. Canada is making it easier for the oil companies. We need some direction from our political leaders. Hopefully, the Ontario Liberals will follow through on their promise to encourage distributed generation."

"We need a lot of small producers rather than a few large nuclear plants,"

he adds. On a local basis, Chuck senses renewed enthusiasm for his passion. Customers are building new houses that are totally off-grid, incorporating substantial investments in energy innovation. He sees homeowners who have never connected to the grid for either ideological reasons, or practical ones.

For homes and cottages far from a power line, the cost of connecting can be astronomical. Chuck's first solar and wind customers were cottage owners who live far from the nearest access point, and simply want running water and a few light bulbs. By combining propane-



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Dan Creighton, Ross Rowat, Brad Leonard, Chuck Gobeil



powered appliances, solar arrays supplying battery banks, propane, and wood heat, Renewable Energy of Plum Hollow can design an independent household.

"It's not for everyone, though," he cautions. "Users need to take the occasional reading, and have to embrace the spirit of the technology. It's not always the most cost effective, but it's justifiable if the cost to hook up to the grid is too high. The flipside is, when the grid goes down, you don't."

Even among the devoted, there is a conflict. "Men want wind generators," Chuck notes with a smile. "I've seen the trend for years. They like something that moves and makes noise. Women are often more sensible, and see the simplicity and reliability of solar panels. Solar requires very little maintenance, and the panels come with a 25-year warranty. They've been powering the space age for 50 years, so they

should pump water at the cottage."

Renewable Energy of Plum Hollow has designed solar systems to light road signs at a tenth the consumption of conventional power; they can power a water system pumping 5,000 gallons a day on a Wolfe Island farm that is remote from the grid, and although the capital investment is \$15,000, the cost of a one-time hydro connection is \$10,000. They can design solar powered weigh scales at remote gravel pits, security systems, signs, lighting, and more. The applications are unlimited.

Chuck believes in his heart that this is a technology on the brink of exploding, hindered only by consumer and government ignorance. The industry has matured, and legislating bodies are finally understanding solar and wind energy. "It is poised to become mainstream," he predicts. "It needs political will."

Into this mix of passion, knowledge, and political critique arrived Brad and Dan, who had experience selling environmental products in the Kingston area. They knew Chuck and Ross, and offered their assistance if Renewable Energy of Plum Hollow decided to open a Kingston location. By 1996, the draw of the larger market was too much to resist, and a second branch opened, with an expanded product line including solid fuel (wood burning stoves and fireplaces).

By 1998, the Kingston location became so busy that Renewable Energy of Plum Hollow consolidated its two locations into one, closing the Cheese Factory.

There were regrets, though. "Kingston is obviously a bigger market, and we are very thankful to our customers who have made all of this possible. We started out with the four of us doing everything, and

now have 10 full time employees plus subcontractors. We are grateful for the opportunities our customers have afforded, but it was wonderful in the country, looking out over the fields," recalls Brad.

In 2005, Renewable Energy of Plum Hollow purchased a new 10,000 sq. ft. facility and created a spectacular 2,500 sq. ft. showroom at 271 Dalton St. in Kingston. While the new location includes out-buildings, offices, and ample storage of a vast array of product, the showroom truly enraptures customers.

Raised stone pedestals showcase stoves; several stone walls house multiple fireplace inserts; a kitchen area contains vintage appliances, including wood and gas replica cook stoves by Heartland; fireplaces, complete with mantels, adorn exterior walls and columns within the warmly decorated room. There are more than 70 stoves, fireplaces, and in-

serts on display constantly, and during the heating season, up to 40 are operating.

"We really strive for an across-the-board selection," says Brad. "We recognize that our customers are intelligent and deserve to be treated that way. We give them a great selection backed by knowledgeable advice, and we stand by our products."

The expanded venue allowed Renewable Energy of Plum Hollow to cater not only to their valued retail customers, but also to a rapidly growing list of homebuilders and specialty contractors who rely on the expertise of the partners for their own customers. "We have always had strong alliances with contractors, and the new showroom affords an increased selection for both our professional customers, and in turn, their clients who are seeking selection and advice on home heating solutions," explains Ross. "We frequently consult with con-

tractors, homebuilders, and designers, and the selection in our showroom helps us serve them at an exceptional level."

"Homebuilders and contractors are undergoing unprecedented demands for new technology, especially home heating solutions that combine ambiance and reliability."

Pellet stoves continued to dominate the market throughout the 1990s, but after the ice storm of 1998, customers were demanding natural gas and propane stoves, too.

"Even though arguably gas is not renewable energy, we still focus on selling appropriate heating," continues Brad. "If you spend 80 per cent of your time in one area, then focus 80 per cent of the heat resources in that zone."

Woodstoves in general and pellet stoves in particular remain the ideological favourite of the four partners.

"We at Renewable



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Energy of Plum Hollow have a tradition of pellet stoves," says Brad. "In the last four years, pellet stove manufacturers have had a hard time keeping up to demand. The market is going crazy for them."

With good reason, apparently. Mr. Leonard notes that the fuel cost is half that of electric or propane, and 30 to 40 per cent cheaper than oil. While natural gas in urban areas remains competitive, with rising oil prices, it is predictable that natural gas will follow.

As a renewable resource, pellet stove fuel is perfect. They are a by-product, not a primary product. There are currently more than 60 pellet mills across North America producing more than 680,000 tons of fuel per year, and diverting millions of cubic yards of waste from landfills.

The pellets boast uniform moisture content, usually under 10 per cent versus solid wood that can vary between 20 and 50 per cent. As such, the pellets provide more heat per volume than wood and less ash.

It takes about one 40-pound pellet bag per day to heat a typical 1,500 sq. ft. home using the pellet stove as the primary heat source. That works out to about three or four tons of pellets annually, based on 150 to 200 heat-



ing days. Comparatively, it would take about three to four full cord of wood. Brad estimates that due to the tremendous demand in the area, Renewable Energy of Plum Hollow will go through more than 2,500 tons of pellets this year.

"People who buy a wood or pellet stove as a secondary heat source or to warm a basement family room surprise themselves with how much they use it. There is something very comforting and connecting in burning wood. Wood heat is a tradition in east-

ern Ontario. It's a different heat, a different feeling. Wood heat lets you go out onto the land, cleaning out deadfall, the fencerow, harvesting your own resources. It connects us to the land."

The partners are recognized experts in the pellet stove industry, offering one of the largest selections in Ontario and garnering several sales awards from North American manufacturers. "We were the largest dealer for two of our pellet manufacturers, and the same with some of our woodstove suppliers,"

relates Brad.

From customers thwarting the energy crisis of the mid to late '70s, to a new demographic demanding aesthetics as well as functionality, Renewable Energy of Plum Hollow has the solution. "We're installing two or three units in some homes now," observes Brad. "People are settling into this area from Toronto, Ottawa, and Montreal and have the resources to build or buy their dream home. Many see this as their last home, and they are outfitting it the way they want."

While rural homeowners who primarily heat with oil remain the core customer base, the trend is shifting to the cities, as well. Traditionally, urbanites chose a gas appliance, but that too is a changing market. "We're seeing a transition, with more of a mix. We're surprised how many people are choosing wood or pellet stoves."

The shift started, Brad figures, after the ice storm. With hydro out for weeks in some areas, people quickly learned the benefits of solid fuel. "We saw

a lot less resistance from insurers after the ice storm," he recalls.

Increased acceptance of wood heat coincided with elevated national attention to safety and installation standards. "Regardless of the fuel, we're putting fire into your home," says Brad. "We don't take that lightly. There are a lot of nuances to the codes, and safety is our priority."

Brad is a director of Wood Energy Technology Transfer Inc., (WETT), a Canadian non-profit association promoting the safe and effective use of wood burning systems.

"Insurers demand that professionals install and inspect wood burning stoves," simplifies Brad. "Installations have become codified in the past 20 to 25 years. We didn't know then what we know now. If we're not comfortable with anything that poses a safety issue, we'll insist that it be upgraded, or we'll turn down the job."

Brad insists that when a wood stove is installed properly, it is one of the safest appliances a homeowner can have, and Renewable Energy of Plum Hollow is promoting that fact through its professional installations done by certified installers.

Every installation has a WETT certified technician involved and

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the company is committed to continuing education of its staff, paying for initial certification and upgrading courses as required.

"We have the highest percentage of WETT certified installers in the area," Brad notes with pride. "It's a culture that the company has adopted, to do things properly and ethically. We don't see it as a bad thing that we will decline customers who don't want to do things right. Our commitment to safety brings people back."

Although gas stoves are a relatively new addition to the product line up, Renewable Energy of Plum Hollow has made a full commitment. "We are excited about the product lines we carry in gas stoves," says Brad. "We represent a lot of Canadian manufacturers, and feel that they are unmatched. Some of the best gas stove components in the world are made in Canada."

Brad also points out the Canada has some of the strictest tests for chimneys in the world. "What we use for oil, the Americans use for wood. We are recognized as world leaders."

Renewable Energy of Plum Hollow is about so much more than sales and service, although the company excels at both. The partners, and through their leadership, the entire staff,



spends a lot of time talking to customers, having a good chat, as Brad says, and figuring out the next step. "This is a process, it takes time, and we are definitely not high pressure in here. We need information to help our customers make the right choice, and we spend more time asking questions and educating them than we do trying to sell them an appliance."

"Price isn't the primary issue, although we're certainly competitive. Safety is so much more important. We want our customers to know what to expect, learn the proper

operation, and understand that the appliances will need an annual service. Regardless of the fuel, wood, pellet, gas, or propane, it should be serviced by a qualified technician every year. Explaining that to our customers is something we take very seriously, and it's why they keep coming back; why we've grown so quickly and had years of 40 per cent growth. We have terrific customers, and meet some great people. Hearth shops like ours, owned and operated by people who live and work in the community - we're here because we want to be."

"We really enjoy the interaction and learn from it. We love to hear our customers tell us about their experiences. Everyone has a favourite wood, or technique, or a great story. It is something very Canadian. It goes right to the heart."

The comprehensive and attractive website, www.renewableenergy.on.ca, puts the company in an enviable position of turning down business. "We get enquiries regularly from around the world, asking about our products," explains Brad. "We don't sell just stoves, we sell a service, and if we can't service

the sale, we have to decline it."

Business is good, and the pending heating season promises to be stellar for the company. Between rising energy costs, an increasing demand for aesthetics, and a natural inclination, especially this summer, to delay thinking about winter heating until

cooler temperatures prevail, Brad and his compatriots are gearing up for a wild ride.

"From now until February, we're going to be steady, but the super busy time is from now until Christmas," he predicted on a swelteringly hot day in early August. "We're anticipating a lot of growth due to record oil prices. A lot of the challenge is meeting the immediate demand that follows the first frost."

The partners have been through the cycle many times. Ice storms, oil prices, changing regulations, and early frosts have merely strengthened their passion.

Renewable Energy of Plum Hollow embraces its ideology, stands by its products, and rejoices in its customers. Chuck, Ross, Dan, and Brad realize that they are blessed that they can pursue their dreams successfully, and share them with their constituents.

For them, their mission is simple:

"Everyone can have a hearth in their home."



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