



March 2015 Sustainability Hero Laura Mandell, Founder/Chair, Warren Green Team and Chair, Environmental Commission

“As chair of the green team, I often feel like an orchestra conductor,” Laura Mandell commented, “I recruit the best people to play different roles while keeping my eye on the overarching plan. Together we put in the hard work and the result is something bigger and more beautiful than was there before.” As a 21-year Warren Township resident, Laura has combined her leadership skills, municipal government experience and passion for a sustainable environment to become a true catalyst for change in her town.



In 2010, Laura was asked by the Warren Township Committee to start the [Warren Township Green Team](#) and has served as the chair for the past five years. She is also the current chair of the Warren Environmental Commission. Laura led the campaign for Warren Township to achieve Sustainable Jersey bronze-level certification with 225 points in 2011. Then in 2014, the green team achieved silver-level certification with an impressive 365 points. She said that the Sustainable Jersey program provides structure and access to expert resources that helps to get initiatives done. Read the complete [Warren Township Sustainable Jersey Certification Report](#) to see all of the actions completed.

Pascack Hills High School to Ithaca College to New York City

Laura has lived in New Jersey for most of her life; she attended Pascack Hills High School in Bergen County and is the oldest of three children. While working on her BA in English at Ithaca College, she was surrounded by breathtaking gorges, deep ravines and Lake Cayuga. She said that she always has had a deep appreciation for the outdoors, but that her time in Ithaca served to heighten her respect for the natural environment. After college, Laura moved to New York City and prospered in publishing. When she married and had a family, she wanted to be closer to nature and found it in Warren Township, which is located in the eastern part of Somerset County between the first and second ridges of the Watchung Mountains.

Laura became active in the community and took a leadership role in a successful 3.2 million dollar Supplemental Referendum Campaign to fund school construction at Watchung Hills Regional High School. Then in 2009, she assisted with the regional green fair in which four towns collaborated. Laura said, “The Township Committee members knew of my interest in the environment and they asked me to serve on the Environmental Commission and join the green team.”

Warren Township Green Team

The eleven-member Warren Township Green Team are volunteers who meet monthly. Laura said the green team’s mission is “to be a resource for the residents of Warren in communicating sustainable practices and creating programs that enhance quality of life through conservation and environmental management.”



Four green team members also serve on the Warren Environmental Commission and two members are volunteers at the Wagner Farm Arboretum. To expand the outreach possibilities, the green team collaborates with other groups in town including the Warren Environmental Commission, the Watchung Hills Environmental Club, the girl scouts, the library, the Wagner Farm Arboretum and the Warren Recreation Commission. Laura said that the lively conversations and brainstorming sessions fuel the activities of the green team. The group has had an active [Facebook page](#) since 2011 and produces educational materials for the community including brochures such as: [Grass-Cut It and Leave It](#), [Anti-Idling](#), [Pesticide Reduction](#), [Natural Landscaping](#), and the [Local Recycling, Reselling & Donation Sources List](#). Warren Township Mayor Mick Marion said, “The Township

Committee is proud of the work of the green team and its Chairperson Laura Mandell in achieving the Sustainable Jersey silver certification and congratulates Laura on her selection as March 2015 Sustainable Jersey hero.”

In addition to the green team, Laura currently works at [The Fund for New Jersey](#) which provides grant funding to New Jersey non-profits. Approximately one quarter of The Fund’s grant making goes toward environmental and planning areas, which include water quality, land use and regional planning, climate and clean energy.

Laura has also been on the Warren Traffic Committee, the Master Plan Committee and was the Parent Teacher Organization President at Watchung Hills Regional High School. She also served for seven years as an elected member of the Board of Education. While working in this role she initiated many sustainable actions at the school such as green cleaning, energy efficiency and recycling programs. To round out her knowledge of the environment, Laura graduated with the class of 2011 from the Rutgers Cooperative Extension Environmental Stewards Program and wrote Warren’s Environmental Resource Inventory sections on Climate and Air Quality.

Low Impact Checklists for Construction and Planning Wins ANJEC Award

Laura is proud of the work she did to lead the green team development of a [Warren Township Low Impact Checklist: Construction and Planning](#). In 2013, this document won an Association of New Jersey Environmental Commissions (ANJEC) Environmental Achievement Award. The Low Impact Checklists are a resource for homeowners and developers to implement environmentally friendly practices in construction projects.

Laura said, “These lists offer suggestions to create buildings that that are designed to fit their locations and reduce their impact to the environment during construction and for the life of the building. The cost to implement environmentally friendly items in the planning and pre-construction phases, in many cases, is the same as conventional products and in most cases reduces the operating costs and improves the efficiency of the building.”

She added, “Using natural features in design reduces the impact on storm water systems, reduces waste and reduces energy consumption.” The Low Impact Construction Checklist is provided to residents and builders as they apply for construction permits. The lists were also shared with the Watchung Hills Regional High School District to use as a guideline in developing the construction projects of the \$12 million infrastructure referendum. Laura hopes other green teams might review and use these lists as well.



Currently, Warren Township is developing plans for a new municipal building. Along with the green team, Laura encouraged the Township Committee to keep the building as green as possible. After Township consideration of the recommendations, the new municipal building plans include over a dozen environmentally friendly items.

Recycled Oil from Municipal Vehicles Used to Heat Public Works Building

One of Laura’s favorite sustainable actions that Warren has done is the implementation of a sustainable heating system at the Department of Public Works (DPW) building that uses recycled oil. The DPW began reusing the oil taken from municipal vehicles (DPW vehicles, police cars and fire trucks) during tune-ups. The sustainable heating system keeps used oil out of the waste stream by using it to heat the building. Laura said, “Not only does this reduce heating costs each month, it also eliminates the need to pay a company to take the dirty oil from the garage and recycle it. This system fully paid for itself in the first five years.”

Warren Township Green Fair Focuses on Waste Reduction

The Warren Township Green Team conducts a successful green fair every April with a central focus on waste reduction. The 2015 Green Fair is planned for April 26 from 10-1 pm at the township municipal grounds. Last year Laura secured a \$2,000 Sustainable Jersey capacity-building grant that helped cover the cost of a promotional banner, lawn signs and paper shredding. Laura said, “At the fair, we collect items that are difficult to dispose of such as electronics, textiles, books, shoes, eyeglasses, Styrofoam, scrap metal and crayons, with the goal to repurpose and reuse them in order to keep them out of the landfill.”

In the past two years, the fair has kept nearly 36,000 pounds of electronics out of the waste stream. As a result of last year's fair, 468 pounds of clothing and 1,124 pounds of books were routed to the needy. Shoes were sent to those without. Used crayons (48 pounds) were melted and remade into new crayons. Bottle caps collected were used for artwork and sent to a specialized recycling facility. Styrofoam was collected for recycling.

Four hundred and twenty-five pounds of medicines were kept out of the water system and landfills through the collection and 2,075 pounds of paper were shredded. Used eyeglasses were routed to those in need. A natural food market handed out tastings with no waste generated; a business offered free home energy audits and a vendor sold upcycled sweaters made into pet beds. The list goes on and serves as an impressive example of how communities can reduce waste.



2014 Sustainable Jersey Creativity and Innovation Award

Warren Township received the 2014 Sustainable Jersey Creativity and Innovation award for the creation of the mobile [Hazard Tracker App](#) to proactively identify utility hazards as an emergency management tool prior to the arrival of a significant weather-related event. This app was created through a partnership of the Warren Utility Advisory Committee and can be used by other municipalities to become more resilient. Warren also did a [Community Asset Map](#) that is widely viewed and used by township residents to find community resources like the numerous hiking trails and open spaces in Warren Township.

Successful Movie Series Leads to Creation of Regional Pollinator Partnership

The Warren Green Team followed a Watchung Environmental Commission screening of the movie *Queen of the Sun: What the Bees are Telling Us* with the movie *Wings of Life*, which was an up-close look at pollinators. At the event, a local Girl Scout Troop performed a song and read a poem about pollinators. The movie nights hosted by the green team have been well attended and successful.

Subsequently, Laura and her colleague Pamela Lewis, from the Watchung Environmental Commission, formed the Regional Pollinator Partnership, which is focused on remedying the collapse of bee colonies and the loss of other pollinators. The group has just sent official recommendations to the Presidential Task Force to Promote the Health of Honey Bees, Native Bees and Other Pollinators. Laura explains "Pollinators are responsible for one third of our food supply and this important link in the ecosystem is under peril. The goal of the Partnership is to create and encourage native pollinate gardens in our communities and to be able to share our examples with other communities in New Jersey."

Family Bike Rides, Hikes and *Moby Dick*

Laura is the proud mother of three children, Erica, age 25, Jeff, age 23 and Scott, age 21. As a family they enjoy the outdoors and make a yearly bike ride across the George Washington Bridge. This past year, Laura and her family made a point to hike most of the hiking trails in Warren.

She is thankful that her husband, Steve, supports her work in the community. Although she did admit that his desire for a green lawn causes some heated discussions at the dinner table over the pros and cons of her campaign for natural lawn care. As if she does not have enough to do, Laura said she enjoys reading and is now tackling *Moby Dick*.

When asked about her future goals, Laura answered, "As for the future, I just hope that our green team can continue to set a good example for sustainable practices. The air we breathe and the water we drink do not have municipal boundaries, so I hope to spur more regional collaboration efforts to tackle our biggest environmental challenges." We wish Laura luck and look forward to seeing the progress that Warren Township makes in the years to come!

