



May 2015 Sustainability Hero Michelle Gentek, Chair, Gloucester Township Green Team and Freeholder Liaison, Sustainable Camden County

Serve and give-back. Michelle Gentek was raised in a household that valued volunteerism. As a councilwoman, green team leader, Parent Teacher Council member, Cub Scout leader, neighborhood watch chair, religious education teacher, County Freeholder and most importantly, a mother of three boys, Michelle has clearly demonstrated her commitment to serving her community while being a tireless steward for the environment.

Under her leadership as green team chair, Gloucester Township achieved Sustainable Jersey certification at the silver-level and received the 2012 Sustainable Jersey Leadership award. As Camden County Freeholder, Michelle led the effort to get all 37 municipalities in Camden County registered with Sustainable Jersey and has greatly expanded the county's sustainability efforts and environmental education.

Michelle is a life-long South Jersey girl; she grew up in Voorhees and Marlton and attended Bishop Eustace Preparatory School before moving into a career in business and eventually making her home in Gloucester Township. Michelle was chairwoman of her neighborhood watch program for 12 years, which resulted in her taking on the National Rifle Association in a hunting dispute where she fought to prevent hunting in her neighborhood. This fight brought her to the council meetings on a regular basis, which in turn led to her running for public office.



Silver-Certified Gloucester Township, Camden County

Michelle served as a Councilwoman in Gloucester Township from 2010-2012. Gloucester Township has a small-town feel but is also one of the fastest growing municipalities in South Jersey with a population approaching seventy-thousand residents. When she was first elected to council, Michelle attended a Sustainable Jersey panel at the New Jersey League of Municipalities Conference in Atlantic City. She described it as her 'ah-ha' moment and the point at which she decided to focus her efforts in office on sustainability. "Sustainable Jersey directed my passion so that sustainability now defines all that I do," Michelle said.

Michelle initiated the town's green team ([Sustainable Gloucester Township](#)) and, in just one year, earned the township a bronze-level Sustainable Jersey certification followed by a silver-level certification. You can read [Gloucester Township's Sustainable Jersey Certification Report](#) to see all of the actions the town completed to achieve certification. Michelle has benefited from reviewing other towns' certification reports; she commented, "Sustainable Jersey provided me with the guidelines and the know-how to get things done in my community. I love that you can see what all of the other towns are doing through the on-line certification reports. I've gotten a lot of good ideas."



Michelle helped Gloucester Township develop a comprehensive [Energy Master Plan](#) that includes installation of solar panels on the municipal building and a \$21 million shared services solar project in partnership with the Gloucester Township Public Schools and the Black Horse Pike Regional School District. She also helped to create the Township's first community garden program and has worked to revitalize downtown Blackwood by merging economic development with the arts.

Michelle has high praise for the amazing green team she works with in Gloucester Township. She explained that it has evolved and there is now a core group of 15 members that are each responsible for a separate area or task. Michelle said that the green team has just started using an on-line Google group to communicate in-between their monthly meeting and it has fostered better communication as things come up and projects move forward.

All 37 Camden County Municipalities Registered with Sustainable Jersey

In 2012, Michelle was elected a Camden County Freeholder where she continues to focus on sustainability. She made it her goal to get every municipality in Camden County registered with Sustainable Jersey. "I'm a hands-on person and I knew that the only way to introduce Sustainable Jersey to the towns not participating was to meet with each mayor and sit across the desk. All of the mayors were receptive and we offered assistance to help them work on the certification," Michelle noted. Michelle attended these meetings with her colleague and partner in sustainability, Chris Waldron, LEED AP, who is the director of the Camden County Office of Sustainability and Shared Services. Camden County is the first county in New Jersey to create and fund a county sustainability director position. Check out the [Sustainable Camden County website](#) for good resources and information.



In 2014, Camden County became only the second county in New Jersey to have all of its municipalities registered with Sustainable Jersey. Thirteen of the towns are certified and have received more than \$100,000 in grants over the past two years to further their sustainability efforts. "This is the realization of a goal we set for ourselves in 2012. It's the culmination of a lot of hard work, coordination and planning," said Michelle. At least three more county municipalities are on track to be certified in 2015, with more working toward the goal. Michelle and Chris are planning to host a regular meeting where all of the municipalities in Camden County can come together to discuss their sustainability efforts.

Hands-on Sustainability Learning at Lakeland Complex and Christmas Tree Rental

Sustainable Camden County partnered with the Rutgers Master Gardeners and green teams and environmental commissions throughout the county to develop an 8-acre site called the Lakeland Complex which will serve as a hub for community gardening, environmental education and programs that will benefit adults and children with disabilities. The Camden County Office of Sustainability and Shared Services has moved its offices to the site that also includes a Tool Library and an Outdoor Environmental Classroom, along with an expansion of the Camden County BikeShare Program.



Before the renovation of the Lakeland Complex began, the site had a group of abandoned greenhouses. "When I first saw the abandoned greenhouses, I knew we could transform them and the area into something great," said Michelle. The greenhouse and hoop houses have now been rehabilitated as part of the park. Michelle admitted, "I had some secret doubts that our plan to grow our own plants to use in the county parks would

possibly not work. But we kept pushing forward, and we have an amazing group of volunteers that work hard. I'm proud to say that now in our second year, we grew about 15,000 plants that are being used in our county parks." Michelle said that the effort is also saving the purchasing department money since they were able to buy smaller plants and grow them with the help of the Rutgers Master Gardeners and volunteers from local municipal green teams. The group is helping with a transition to perennials and creating green areas in place of grass. There are about fifty volunteers that are working on these projects weekly.

They are now developing a Christmas tree farm, where residents will be able to 'rent' a tree during the holidays and return it to be replanted, thus reducing the waste of cutting a tree that might end up in a landfill.

Camden County Offers First Tool Library in New Jersey

Also part of the Lakeland Complex, Sustainable Camden County is establishing the first tool library in New Jersey that is stocked with donated tools and staffed by volunteers. Library members will be able to borrow a tool that they need for a specific job around the house. "Imagine you need a tool that would cost \$100 to buy, but you only need it once in a while. Using the tool library, you can borrow what you need, saving you money and reducing the clutter of tools you rarely use," said Michelle. "We are very proud to be the first bringing this innovative program to New Jersey."

Gloucester Township Switch to Single-Stream Recycling Saves \$300,000/year

As part of her work with the Gloucester Township Green Team, Michelle helped implement a Single-Stream Recycling program that makes it more efficient for people to recycle. The township has increased recycling and has reduced the trash tonnage in the community. This alone has already saved over \$300,000 each year.

Not only has the single-stream recycling program benefited Gloucester Township environmentally, it has allowed the community to unite in a stance to support breast cancer awareness. Each recycling container, painted with a pink lid and ribbon, symbolizes the township's commitment to the American Cancer Society in an effort to defeat a disease that affects one in eight women nationally. This is a cause close to Michelle's heart as her mother Cecilia is a breast-cancer survivor. Take a minute to watch the great video, "[How Recycling Works](#)" with Gloucester Mayor Dave Mayer and the pink-topped recycling bins.



Gloucester Township Mayor Dave Mayer in Recycling Video

Antiquing, Gardening and Family Trips

In her free time, Michelle enjoys going antiquing—after all antiques are re-use. She also does a lot of gardening and spends time with her family traveling to the beach or to the mountains to ski. Michelle is very proud of her three boys: Ryan, age 22, Matthew, age 19, and Thomas, age 14. Michelle is happy that they are pursuing careers that involve helping others; currently Ryan is getting a master's degree in psychology and Mathew is studying physical therapy. And, just last month, Michelle got married to Gloucester Township Mayor Dave Mayer.

Michelle has successfully built her political career on a platform of sustainability. It has directly enhanced her community and Camden County while her path serves as an excellent example for all elected officials across New Jersey and beyond. Michelle sums it up best, "I'm happy to report that environmentalists are now the cool kids. For me, it's more of a way of life rather than an alternative way of thinking. If you want to be part of the global community—you have to be a part of this movement."