

Beyond the bags and bulbs

Franke James had made small steps in the pursuit of an eco-friendly lifestyle, but it was the selling of her SUV that started a giant leap toward greener pastures

BY MONIQUE BEAUDIN, THE GAZETTE APRIL 27, 2009



One less SUV on the road: Selling the car was hard, Franke James said, but she discovered many benefits, including that her family consumes less: "If you don't have a car, it kind of slows down the process of acquiring new goods." Photograph by: Marcos Townsend, Gazette file photo

Franke James has a message for people who want to make environmentally friendly changes in their lives: Do the hardest thing first.

Don't settle for changing light bulbs, turning off the water when you brush your teeth and ditching plastic bags. Do something hard that will make a big impact on the environment.

"It's human nature to want to postpone hard things," she said. "We need to face up to the fact that we need to tackle the hard stuff first while we're strong enough to do it."

And that's how she decided to do something big about climate change – by selling her family's only vehicle, their SUV.

"You can change a light bulb, but do you really feel good about that?" asked James, who will be in Montreal next month to take part in the fifth World Environmental Education Congress. "I wanted to do something that was a big statement that I would feel was a big lifestyle change."

She tells the story of her green conversion in her new book, *Bothered by My Green Conscience* (New Society Publishers, \$16.95), a collection of visual essays, mixing illustrations, photos and words.

While she and her family had made small gestures for the environment – like using recycled paper for her work – after an energy audit was done on their home showing how energy-inefficient it was, James felt she had to do more.

"Selling the car was definitely the hardest thing," she said. "Every day you get up, and you don't have a car. So you have to live with that reality."

The transition was made easier by the fact that she lived within walking distance of grocery stores, a pharmacy, coffee shops and a bank. With her children grown, James said, her days of chauffeuring her kids from activity to activity were also over. *(Continued on next page...)*

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While getting rid of the car saved money – an estimated \$10,000 a year – it brought some unexpected changes, too. Improved fitness, for one thing. And without a car to haul things around in, her family consumes far less.

“If you don’t have a car, it kind of slows down the process of acquiring new goods,” she said. “Overconsumption is one of the huge environmental problems we face in the world.”

Without the car, she gets around by walking, running, cycling, using public transit, taking a taxi if she needs to lug something big with her, and taking intercity buses and trains for longer trips.

Once the car was gone, James and her husband figured they didn't really need the driveway anymore. That turned out to be trickier than selling the car, though. James lives in Toronto's North York neighbourhood, and its bylaws decreed that each home must have a driveway made of concrete, asphalt or interlocked paving stones. When she applied for a permit to rip up her driveway, she was turned down.

Undeterred, she went to the mayor's office, where her plan got the green light. She and her husband tore up the old driveway and, using the swapping website Freecycle, found someone who wanted the old interlock stones. A woman and her son picked them up and used them to make a patio in their backyard.

With the pavement out of the way, James put down a layer of permeable plastic interlocking blocks that would allow grass to grow through them, and planted grass, trees and bushes.

“It really improves the look so much, because you've just got this green from side to side. It's beautiful,” she said.

While some people were critical of James's green moves – in her book, her brother-in-law says she's turned into a “granola-crunching, tree-hugging whack job” – she says she felt she had no choice.

“In general, people are not aiming very high in terms of climate change,” she said. “They say, ‘I’m recycling, changing light bulbs, what more do you want me to do? I’ve got a life’”

In her book, James writes to her future grandchildren, saying she imagines them “cursing us – yelling and stamping your feet that we were stupid and selfish and mean.” She says she wants them to know that she tried to do something about climate change.

“Even if I’m one of the few who is actually taking personal responsibility and changing my lifestyle, at least I've done something,” she said. “My future grandkids are going to think, ‘She did try. She changed her lifestyle and she did write about it and communicate it.’”

Lest you think James is hectoring people who aren't as green as she is, she says that's the last thing she wants to do. Everyone can tackle global warming in their own way, James emphasizes.

“I would hope that each person would find their own thing that's right for them to do,” she said. “If they could just raise the bar a little and do something ambitious, because we are seeing the changes all around us – the polar ice caps melting, we are having weird weather. Climate change is coming faster than anybody expected.”

So what else is James planning to do to make sure her grandchildren know she did everything she could to stop global warming? She's going to plant a garden in her front yard.

“We have tremendous sunlight there and it will be great for growing food,” she said, adding that no one in her neighbourhood has vegetable gardens in front of their homes. “I’m sure it will cause great conversation.”

You can check out James's visual essays at www.frankejames.com. She will be speaking at the fifth World Environmental Education Congress at Palais des congrès on May 11. For information, visit www.5weec.uqam.ca.

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