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Franciscan center demos sustainability for Ohio community

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If you?re in Tiffin, Ohio, then you?re not far from anything, say some locals. Roughly 60 miles southeast of Toledo, the rural northwest town of the Buckeye State stretches a mere three miles from one end to the other.

But that also means you?re not far from the Franciscan Earth Literacy Center [1], an education and demonstration facility designed to encourage sustainable living practices through hands-on learning for all ages.

Established in 1994 by the Sisters of St. Francis, the center offers a variety of programs for the surrounding Seneca County community that springs from one of the sisters? core missions ? care for creation.

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Mike Conner, director of the earth literacy center, said the idea for the center came after a 10-year study by the sisters of their campus.

?They felt like [caring for creation] was an area that was part of their mission that they could do a better job at, and that?s why they created the earth literacy center,? he explained.

Nearly 20 years later, the center has grown in its effort to share sustainable ideas, and that has included offering adult education programs, one of which will take place on April 28.

?French Fried Engines? [2] is a how-to workshop on converting an engine from running on diesel fuel to vegetable oil.

?Converting your machinery to vegetable oil not only is a more sustainable alternative to petroleum-based fuels, it can be a huge savings to your wallet buy reducing your fuel costs,? Conner said.

But those participating in the workshop won?t just be listening to Dr. Enrique Gomezdelcampo of Bowling Green State University?s Department of Geology explain the process, they?ll be trying their hand at it, as well.

?I think folks learn a lot more when they get involved in something, and they?re moving around, and it?s not

just a sit-and-listen kind of presentation,? said Conner.

The vegetable oil engine workshop is just the latest in a series of programs aimed at adults, whereas much of the early educational offerings at the center were for students, scout groups and other children.

With the goal of showing people a way to become more sustainable, incorporating adult programs becomes a logical step. But it?s not all limited to workshops. The center is home to the Seeds of Hope Farm that produces organic, chemical-free produce for sale to locals.

Another venture is Project Straw, a house built with natural materials and yes, that includes straw.

The house, named Little Portion Green, has a passive solar design [3] ? using the sun?s energy to heat and cool a building ? and has a net goal of zero energy, meaning the house will use no more energy than generated by its wind turbine and solar panels. The strawbales inside its walls act as insulation, and the house features large, south-facing windows along with energy efficient pane windows and an energy recovery ventilation system.

While Conner said the goal of the house is not to see a thousand similar, straw-bale homes popping up around Tiffin, he hopes it can serve as a tool to help teach people ways to use less energy and become more efficient in their homes.

?We?ve used lots of different ways to save electricity, or save energy in this house, with the windows, with insulation with straw, with passive design, with all kinds of lighting, so there?s a lot to learn about in this house that you could apply to your own house,? he said.

Be it a straw-bale house project, a vegetable oil engine workshop or an all-natural farm, the projects on hand at the Earth Literacy Center all lead back to a common theme of preserving the planet through sustainable living.

?This planet earth is very delicately balanced,? said Conner. ?And if we don?t figure out a way quickly to live more in tune with the natural processes and cycles, i.e. sustainability, we?re going to run out of clean air, of clean water, of even materials to make houses out of.

?Being sustainable,? he continued, ?what that does is not only does it preserve the earth, but it preserves our way of life, it preserves what we?re used to living in.?

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