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The Good News Is Local

Kelpie Wilson Interviews Jason Bradford
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Jason Bradford is a PhD evolutionary biologist who studied the effects of climate change on cloud forests in the Andes under the auspices of the Missouri Botanical Garden and other institutions. But in 2004 he switched his focus from study to action by initiating a remarkable community organizing effort in his new home town of Willits, California, called [Willits Economic Localization \(WELL\)](#).

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In a world where the global political, economic, and environmental trends are so negative and frightening, efforts like WELL really stand out. Jason is no slouch at spreading the word about WELL - he hosts a radio show called The Reality Report, is a correspondent for Global Public Media, and periodically contributes to his local newspaper - so I asked him to answer a few questions about the project for Truthout readers.

Kelpie Wilson: Jason, in a nutshell, what is the mission of WELL?

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Jason Bradford: The official WELL mission is to foster the creation of a local, sustainable economy in the Willits area by partnering with other organizations to watch for opportunities and vulnerabilities, incubate and coordinate projects, and facilitate dialogue, action and education within our community.

The greatest challenge we, as a species, face right now is to create a way of life based on the energy flow of sunlight, not fossil or nuclear energy, to do so without destroying our soils, and to enroll others in this transition. We are under no illusion that Willits can tackle this alone, but hope that Willits can be an inspiration to others. If we can do it here, it is possible elsewhere.

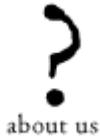
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KW: How did you make the decision to switch from a career in climate change and biodiversity research to this hands-on engagement with sustainable living?

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Jason Bradford: I became really frustrated and disillusioned as a researcher. I would sit in my office and read the flood of data about the climate system, habitat loss and extinction, soil and fresh water depletion, and the impending peak of global oil production. Then I would listen to the radio or look at the newspaper and these issues were basically ignored, meaning my work was being ignored. Why would people train and fund scientists to do this work and then not pay any attention to them?

The institutions I was associated with didn't appear to want to examine the root causes of these problems either. The fact that our financial system is designed to liquidate our life support system, rewarding current returns over any hope for our descendants is hard to factor into the day-to-day



decisions a university makes, especially when more and more funding is coming from corporations and endowments tied to the growth of investments. People didn't want to hear what I had to say, and I felt that.

My wife is a physician, and so I could afford to drop out and make a switch. We strategically moved to a place that was relatively small. We felt that social capital would be easier to build here, and the area had a history of thinking about renewable energy and sustainable agriculture. It was a bet that paid off.

KW: In his Labor Day speech, President Bush addressed our "oil addiction" and said that the problem is that "dependence on foreign oil jeopardizes our capacity to grow." In your view, is the energy crisis mostly about our dependence on foreign oil from "people who don't like us," as the president said? Or is there a deeper problem?

Jason Bradford: It is extremely important right now to give people heartfelt honesty. The lies of Bush and Cheney make them bigger threats than those swarthy people they like to scare us with. Cheney said the American way of life is non-negotiable. In a bizarre sense that is true. The laws of physics and ecology won't negotiate and can't be unilaterally ignored. And those laws are telling us we need to change how we inhabit this planet very quickly or we may not be around that much longer.

I have an idea. Let's stop blaming others for our problems. The deeper issue is our addiction to growth. Oil has permitted astounding economic growth, and we have become dependent, both structurally and psychologically, upon not just the oil but the growth process itself. Instead of questioning our assumptions, we are going to war for oil and we are looking for substitutes that are very dirty, like coal, tar sands, and nuclear. And while I am in complete favor of developing renewable energy systems as quickly as possible, I don't believe it is either possible or wise to grow our economy using renewable energy.

The problems with growth are easy to understand, but the implications are hard to face. For example, I have two children, twin boys who are seven years old. For now and over the next dozen years or so I'll be happy if they grow. During certain phases of development growth is perfectly good. But our economy is now beyond any reasonable limits, and we are making ourselves sick with more growth - as a society we have obesity and cancer, and the vital organs are starting to fail. Suburban sprawl, highway expansion, military build-up, air pollution, climate change, and mass extinction of species - these all stem from our drive to grow the economy.

Ironically, there exists a counter movement to slow down in life. Enjoy quality rather than quantity. Many are finding that the pleasures of a beautiful home, neighborhood and community are rewarding enough. Spend time building relationships where you are instead of traveling afar and spending money on things. Less is more. Now that is truly economical.

KW: Obviously the Bush administration is not going to tackle the twin problems of peak fossil fuels and climate change in an effective manner. But with the new climate change legislation in California, it looks like action to address energy and climate change at the state level is possible. Why should people spend their time on economic relocalization as you are doing in Willits rather than work for change at the state level, for instance?

Jason Bradford: I wouldn't say it is an either or proposition. If you have a zone of control or influence at the state level, then by all means work there. But for most people, they can only reasonably feel connected at the local level. I can attend city council meetings, but I am not going to drive to Sacramento for a session of the legislature.

However, what happens at the local level has a big influence on what happens at the state, and vice versa. State representatives will more likely listen to the consensus of the local elected officials than to what an individual citizen might tell them. And cautious local officials will be more open to change if the state is behind it too.

There are just over 2000 homes in Willits. A well-organized group of people can go out in a day and knock on every door. The post office does it! Making personal, face-to-face connections is much more powerful than any other form of communication. It will trump phone calls, emails, newspapers and TV news.

And guess what. As soon as the media and the politicians realize they have an informed and passionate constituency, they will begin copying those messages. It will become a positive feedback with the potential for rapid social change.

KW: From what I have read about WELL, I am amazed at the boldness and scope of what you are doing. Can you give us short descriptions of the half dozen or so most important accomplishments of the group so far?

Jason Bradford: First, I want to make it clear that WELL always works in partnership. None of these accomplishments are ours alone, but involve dialogue and cooperation with others. In fact, it is difficult to know what is WELL versus some other group. We have overlapping roles and are all in this together. This is about all of Willits.

For example, the WELL Energy Group did an inventory of how much energy is consumed in the Willits area. A local city councilman took notice and asked what the city could do. He created an official ad hoc energy group that eventually recommended that the city install photovoltaic panels to run the city water systems, both treatment and sewage. The city council agreed to this, and soon the city will be requesting proposals from contractors to build this.

An amazing group sprang out of the WELL Food Group called the Grateful Gleaners. They go get fruit and vegetables that would otherwise rot, share with the land owner, each other, local food banks, and after-school snack programs. The Gleaners are harvesting literally tons of fruit and giving it away.

For the past 18 months, WELL has organized and co-sponsored dozens of public forums that have raised awareness among the population. At these events and following them, people talk about what really matters and have a social network in which to organize action. The successful ingredients for social change are: providing compelling, relevant information, a place to build relationships, and an organizational structure for continuity and administration of tasks.

Ideally, what WELL wants is for our mission to be taken up by individuals and other institutions. This is starting to happen. On the individual level, many people are evaluating their own habits and consumption patterns.

More collectively, neighborhood gardens are going in. One house may have a big yard, so groups of families are sharing the space and chores. The business community is being enrolled through the Chamber of Commerce, which joined the Business Alliance for Local, Living Economies (BALLE) and is developing a Local First campaign to highlight the benefits of local production, retail and ownership. The Community Development Director for the city has used portions of his budget to co-sponsor events with WELL, and is open to re-evaluating city plans, codes and practices. The school district has allocated an acre of land at an elementary school for an organic community farm. The local county social services center has set aside half an acre for a community garden. The city is sponsoring the Home Energy Link Program of the Renewable Energy Development Institute to

do energy audits and then energy efficiency makeovers in Willits homes. The Bank of Willits has approved the Economic Localization Fund in which local savings dollars are used to finance energy conservation projects. WELL participants are becoming mentors of high school students for clubs and independent study projects. Our newsletter is now a column in the local paper.

I think we have done a great job raising community spirits. So many positive changes are occurring, and each time one of these projects gets going it makes it more likely someone will become motivated to follow their own passion and become a leader of something else.

KW: The community spirit is key, it seems to me. Tell us a little about how the group recruits new members and sustains that spirit.

Jason Bradford: Initially, we set up regular screenings of "[The End of Suburbia](#)" and introduced people to WELL. Hundreds of folks around town came to those over several months. The numbers coming to the film dwindled and we were left with many core activists. We spent some time formalizing how we operate, define membership, and elect a council. Soon, we will be doing a significant outreach to the community.

This outreach is important because many people are very supportive but can't regularly attend our meetings or events. They want to be on our mailing list, give us donations, and sort out their support role. Maybe they own a business and give us free services, for example. Or they are going to shift their business practices to be more sustainable. We want to support and promote any family, organization, or business that is willing to make changes towards a sustainable, local economy.

The various subgroups of WELL have split off into projects based on the interests of involved community leaders. Some have felt a dispersion of energy because of this, and so we encourage project groups to report back to the broader WELL group periodically to review the status of their work. By working closely with the WELL office, these community projects get promotion through our web site and newsletter, and announcements at our public events. We also are trying to fundraise for community projects, such as a paid coordinator for a community garden or farm, or equipment for the gleaning club.

Doing anything together has its joys and perils. We can't avoid personality conflicts and miscommunication. I have been amazed, however, at how well people negotiate interpersonal dynamics and come to relationships with compassion and the ability to forgive. For the most part, WELL participants are mature, caring people who have a passion for social change and a sense of urgency. That passion and urgency can be a blessing and a curse, but overall it is the fuel that has kept us going.

KW: What advice do you have for people who would like to start similar groups in their own communities?

Jason Bradford: Leadership is needed from all sorts of people. Have courage and resolve. I ask that those of you worried about the future and upset by the direction of our country, get up and do something about it right where you live. Go beyond angry protests. Begin creating something tangible that realizes your dreams and draws out the aspirations of others.

The first rule is to know your own strengths and weaknesses. Maybe you are a great organizer or strategic thinker, but a terrible public speaker. Next, find some people to work with you to get started and sort out what roles you are good at. The initial goal is to create a team with internal cohesion.

Start planning a strategy. What makes sense in your community, and specifically among your social network? Is disaster preparedness a lead-in topic? Has climate change attracted attention recently? How about high energy prices or the unpopularity of the war? Is the local economy stagnant and/or weighted towards a single, vulnerable industry? Can you connect the dots from any of these topics to the need to relocalize the economy, building a more secure and vibrant home? What projects can you begin that bridge the gap between the current reality and your desired future?

Then build bridges to other groups within the community. Since we are dealing with issues that cut across different kinds of formal and informal social organizations, be flexible enough to go down any paths that show the least resistance. Maybe you will find success with a church group, a school, local government or the business community.

Most importantly of all, get started! You will have troubles and failures. Things will come up that you didn't expect and aren't prepared for. Go easy on yourself; don't get caught up in hindsight. Be honest and persistent and you will earn respect and a following. Cultivate others to follow their own passions. Each of us has the opportunity to rise to some occasion.

Now get moving!

Kelpie Wilson is the Truthout environment editor. A veteran forest protection activist and mechanical engineer, she is the author of Primal Tears, an eco-thriller novel published by North Atlantic Books.

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