

SUSTAINABILITY HERO

March 2022



Donna J. Helmes
Sustainable Collingswood
and Newbie Sustainable School Team (Camden County)

For over 25 years, Donna Helmes has been advancing positive social change in South Jersey. Her focus is on sustainable initiatives that allow for environmental and social justice for all. As a member of the municipal green team, Sustainable Collingswood, and the school district green team, she helps secure grant funding and foster collaborations that enrich Collingswood. She also participates on the Collingswood Creative Team, on the Equity Committee and with [Tri-County Sustainability](#), a Sustainable Jersey regional hub.

As a sustainability leader, she excels at getting past “no” to find creative solutions through community connections. Donna said, “The ability to learn, earn and thrive is what makes positive social change possible. As a mom, I am working for the next generation in the face of the climate crisis. There are going to be winners and losers as we meet the impacts. We need to understand environmental justice and create a sustainable New Jersey for all.”

Collingswood Borough: Sustainable Jersey Silver-Certified: Collingswood Borough, with the help of [Sustainable Collingswood](#) and others, achieved Sustainable Jersey certification at the silver-level in 2019. Donna praised the Sustainable Collingswood members and the staff of Sustainable Jersey. She said, “The green team has great support in the community. Collingswood Mayor Jim Maley, the Collingswood Borough Commissioners and Superintendent Dr. Fredrick McDowell are open to new ideas and help implement the actions. Collingswood is a great place to be green.”



As a member of Sustainable Collingswood, Donna writes articles for local publications and maintains the [Facebook page](#) and [blog](#). The green team coordinates and partners on a variety of town programs such as the [Collingswood Bike Share](#), [Wildlife Habitat Gardens Project](#), [Tree City USA](#) and two community gardens. The borough hosts a successful and long-running Green Festival; in 2019, the event attracted thousands of visitors and offered local organic food, affordable rain barrels, backyard composters and art made from recycled materials that is crafted by neighborhood artisans. For an overview of the Collingswood Borough sustainability actions, review the [2019 Sustainable Jersey Certification Report for Collingswood Borough](#).

Mark Newbie Elementary School: Sustainable Jersey for Schools Bronze-Certified: As a parent of a student at the Mark Newbie Elementary School, Donna helped to strengthen the school green team and work toward *Sustainable Jersey for Schools* certification. The Newbie Sustainable School Team consists of the school principal, teachers, parent volunteers and the Collingswood School District’s Supervisor of Buildings and Grounds. “The Newbie Sustainable School Team supports the student green team. To get started, we explored best practices of the other districts, reviewed the *Sustainable Jersey for Schools* actions and assessed the aspirations of the Newbie school community,” Donna explained. “We met regularly until the school closed in March 2020 due to the pandemic. Even with the closure, teachers held online green team meeting with each other and with students to keep spirits high and a connection to the program.”



After a year of focused work, the Mark Newbie Elementary School achieved bronze certification with *Sustainable Jersey for Schools* in 2020. Much of the work was done in collaboration with Sustainable Collingswood. Follow the school green team on Twitter (@GreenteamNewbie). Review all of the sustainable actions completed in the [2020 Sustainable Jersey for Schools Certification Report of Mark Newbie Elementary School](#).

Collingswood Green Dining District: In 2020, Donna helped Collingswood Borough secure a \$20,000 [Sustainable Jersey grant](#) funded by the PSEG Foundation to implement a Collingswood Green Dining District Initiative. The idea for the project grew out of an effort by members of the Collingswood Business Improvement District and green team. Results from their 2019 Green Dining Survey helped to gauge community interest and form the parameters for the program. The overall goal is to strengthen the local economy by providing another reason to visit Collingswood's local restaurants, all while bringing sustainable practices to local eateries that will reduce waste, reduce emissions and more.

To enhance the green dining district program, Sustainable Collingswood, Friends of the Farmers Market and Collingswood Borough joined forces to implement a disposable plastic bag reduction program. A new rule was introduced at the [Farmers Market](#) that a bag would only be given if shopper asked for one. Volunteers provided shoppers three alternatives to plastic bags through a program called *Bring, Borrow or Buy*. Shoppers could bring their own reusable bag, borrow a bag or buy an inexpensive bag to use instead of plastic. Last year, approximately 500 reusable bags were provided with another 500 distributed at other town-wide events. Collingswood Borough received five Sustainable Jersey certification points with this work with the action: [Reusable Bag Education Program](#).

Blacktop Rain Garden at Mark Newbie Elementary School: Like many New Jersey schools, the Newbie Elementary School playground had a large expanse of impervious blacktop. This surface not only lacked appeal but also had poor drainage. After rainy days, the puddles often prevented students from having outdoor recess. The Newbie Sustainable School Team set out to secure funding and create a rain garden. Donna applied and was successful in getting a \$2,000 [Sustainable Jersey for Schools grant](#) funded by the PSEG Foundation. This gave momentum to the project and the PTA held fundraisers including the popular Monster Mash on the Blacktop that raised over \$2,000.



With funding in place, the students helped design the rain garden with the guidance of [Wild Roots New Jersey](#) who also led the installation. Teachers and parent volunteers assisted with planting the garden. The Collingswood Public Works Department stepped up to water the garden during the summer months and students help to maintain it. Camden County donated log seats for an outdoor classroom. "The rain garden and outdoor classroom project are the result of a collective effort by our school community," said Donna. "The students, the Newbie Sustainable School Team, the PTA, Sustainable Collingswood and Collingswood Borough, worked together to make this a reality."

The most flood-prone area of the blacktop is now a rain garden that collects rainwater runoff, allows water to filter through native vegetation and beautifies the playground. It serves as a teaching tool to demonstrate the importance of stormwater management and the conservation of valuable resources. With this project, the school received ten *Sustainable Jersey for Schools* certification points for completing the action: [Green Infrastructure Assessment & Plan](#) and ten certification points for the action: [Green Infrastructure Installation](#).

Providing Access to Healthy Foods: During the pandemic, Donna joined Collingswood Cares and was stunned by the level of poverty and food insecurity in her town. [Collingswood Cares](#) was started by Collingswood Mayor Maley and his wife to help relieve the burden families faced during sickness and hardship. With the advent of COVID-19, Collingswood Cares altered its mission to support Collingswood residents who needed help during the crisis.



Collingswood Borough and the green team have made access to healthy food a priority for their sustainability program. The Borough, coordinated by Collingswood Commissioner Morgan Robinson, partners with

[Virtua "Eat Well" Food Access Programs](#). Each week, a Virtua Mobile Farmers Market van visits the Parkview at Collingswood Apartments. The mobile market sells fruits and vegetables at significantly reduced prices to all residents. Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) voucher payments are accepted. In addition, Donna is working with City Green to have the Collingswood Farmers Market join the [Good Food Bucks Program](#), which is a SNAP-Doubling farmers market incentive program. The Collingswood Youth Green Team is also adding food and equity projects to their list of initiatives. Students presented their ideas to the principal for consideration including adding more vegetarian options to the school lunch and promoting a Meatless Monday.



Collingswood Senior High School Grant: Build Student Equity through Greening Initiatives:

Building equity through sustainability is an important focus of Donna's participation with the green teams. She worked with the Collingswood School District Green Team to write and secure a \$2,000 *Sustainable Jersey for Schools* Grant funded by the PSEG Foundation. The grant will support their work to build student equity through greening initiatives. Coordinated through the Collingswood Senior High School, the School District Green Team will incorporate social equity in their sustainability program. In addition, Donna is a member of the Collingswood Equity Committee sponsored by the Collingswood Board of Education. The committee is working to enhance and improve the district's efforts to ensure academic success for all students and provide equitable and inclusive working and learning environments for all students, families, staff and communities. Donna has done an impressive job increasing participation in the Collingswood Youth Green Team. She arranged different opportunities to meet with students. "Collingswood Commissioner Morgan Robinson and I enjoyed talking all things sustainable with a super smart group of budding environmentalists," Donna explained. "The new Youth Green Team is already implementing sustainability actions."

Mark Newbie Elementary School Virtual Green Fair: Due the pandemic, the Newbie Student Green Team had to get creative with their green fair. A Virtual Green Fair was held; students spoke on the importance of sustainability and their accomplishments during the year. The event included a welcome from green local organizations and businesses including: [Collingswood Farmers Market](#), [Stephen Coan LLC](#), [Clutter Vintage](#) and [Cup of Bliss Coffee Company](#). Watch the video: <https://bit.ly/3drrus0>.

Art to Build Bridges: Creative Team: Donna is a member of the Collingswood Creative Team, which is led by Collingswood Commissioner Rob Lewandowski and is responsible for guiding the growth and sustainability of local arts, music and culture. Collingswood Borough received ten Sustainable Jersey certification points for this work with the action: [Establish a Creative Team](#). The Collingswood Creative Team is working on the [Creative Assets Inventory](#) action, which will allow the community to explore the cultural activities, artistic resources and other related resources considered to be a creative asset to the community.

Education and Experience: Donna received a BA in City and Urban, Community and Regional Planning from Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey-Camden. While attending Rutgers, Donna volunteered with the [Heart of Camden](#) and eventually joined the staff. The organization provides programs to help residents in the Waterfront South Neighborhood of Camden. Donna served as the Workforce Diversity and Inclusion Specialist at Campbell Soup Company for two years and she worked for eleven years as the Human Capital Resource Manager for Camden Redevelopment Agency. For the past five years, she has been working independently as a consultant with DonnaWrites, Inc. to provide resource development, community development and creative advocacy for clients.



More About Donna: Donna was born in Brooklyn and raised on the North Shore of Long Island in Smithtown. Her connection with the environment and stewardship grew from a childhood spent playing outdoors; she lived next to the woods and the beach. After she attended Rutgers University, Donna lived in Camden for 14 years. In 2010, she moved to Collingswood Borough where she lives with her son Jackson and their pug named Bean. Bean, who is 14 years old, is sometimes featured in the Sustainable Collingswood social media and Jackson, now in sixth grade, is an active member of the Collingswood Youth Green Team.