

# JANUARY 2017 SUSTAINABILITY HERO



## DONNA DREWES Co-Director, Sustainable Jersey

Creative, dedicated, diplomatic, generous, hardworking, inspiring, versatile, knowledgeable, intelligent--these are just a few ways to describe the incredible Donna Drewes.

For the past thirty-seven years, Donna has been protecting our natural resources from the soil on up. She has managed and created powerful programs that bring coalitions together to move sustainability forward. Donna is one of the principals that founded Sustainable Jersey in 2009. She has co-directed Sustainable Jersey and been a steady, guiding force for the past seven years, along with Co-Director Randall Solomon. In February, Donna will be stepping down as co-director in order to spend more time with her family which now includes three grandchildren; she will continue to work part-time in the sustainability realm.

Donna said, "I'm inspired every day by the participants in the Sustainable Jersey program. I really get goosebumps when I see the impact the program has had on so many people. I'm very proud." When asked what comes next, Donna said, "My dream is to continue to build our tribe, the network of sustainable communities. If we build a stronger network, it will propel people to act and inspire the change we need to make a measurable impact."

**Development of Sustainable Jersey:** In 2007, a Sustainable Communities Working Group was formed that consisted of approximately 150 New Jersey leaders, experts and organizations including government agencies, non-profit organizations and businesses. Donna was instrumental in recruiting the diverse cadre of professionals that participated to support program development. Donna said, "I had to persuade them that if we all turn and start rowing in the same direction, we will make progress faster together. People want to be change agents. You just need to ask them to get involved; when you gather a group of people together, change becomes a possibility."

Thirteen different task forces were established to identify specific aspects of each sustainability category in the certification program. Donna helped lead the large policy coordination process that brought state and federal agencies, universities, non-profit organizations, businesses, stakeholders and experts together to define standards and devise incentives for New Jersey municipalities to address sustainability initiatives. After more than a year of intensive work, the Sustainable Jersey program took final form and was launched in February of 2009. Donna explained, "We didn't rush the development of the Sustainable Jersey model; we spent two years building relationships and vetting ideas. It wasn't always easy, but it resulted in a unique program that has definitely caught on with communities."

Donna also led the development of the Sustainable Jersey for Schools program that was launched in 2013. For the past seven years, Donna, with Co-Director Randall Solomon, has successfully implemented the program's strategic vision and achieved the annual work plan goals, all during a period of exponential program growth. She added, "Most people care about the place where they live, their community. When we enable them to take action and make a difference in their town, it is food for the soul, it feels right and that is why the program will continue to grow."



**Past positions: USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service:** Donna is a professional planner with thirty years of experience in sustainable development and natural resource management planning. She has worked as a professional planning consultant in the private sector and for both public agencies and non-governmental organizations. Her experience includes extensive work in the development of regional watershed plans, community sustainability planning, as well as rural and environmental resource management issues.

Donna spent fourteen years working at the [US Department of Agriculture \(USDA\) Natural Resources Conservation Service](#) as the resource conservation and development coordinator and director of a six-county organization representing county government and Soil Conservation Districts in northwest New Jersey. The agency was dedicated to improving the region's economy, environment and living standards. She grew the program from a staff of one to ten grant funded positions working on programs. Donna started her career as one of a group of five women professional technical staff hired in New Jersey for what was then called the Soil Conservation Service. Donna said, "We worked hard to prove ourselves and by the time I left, there were more women working as technical specialists in the field for the agency than men!"



In 2004, Donna took a planning job with the Municipal Land Use Center at The College of New Jersey which is where she was when Sustainable Jersey was started. Sustainable Jersey is now managed by the Sustainability Institute at The College of New Jersey. Donna also worked as a professional planner for Banisch Associates and as a resource specialist with the South Branch Watershed Association.

**Awards and affiliations:** Donna has been the recipient of many awards, including the 2015 Distinguished Civic Leadership Award from the American Planning Association's New Jersey Chapter. She was recognized with the Woman of Inspiration designation from Fairleigh Dickson University and the National Association of Women Business Owners of north central New Jersey. Donna was awarded the national Women of Vision and Courage award from the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Woody Elwood Jarmer Award from American Planning Association's NJ Chapter. Donna was given the Green Community Achievement Award from the NJ Department of Environmental Protection's Community Forestry Program.



Donna is a member of the New Jersey American Planning Association, the American Institute of Certified Planners and the New Jersey Community Forestry Council. She is a past president of the NJ Chapter of the Soil and Water Conservation Society and the NJ- Northeast Organic Farming Association.

**Education in soil science and city planning:** Donna's mother was a member of the leadership team that got Mapleshade High School built. As it turned out, Donna was in the first graduating class. Donna credits her high school science teacher for inspiring her love for the natural sciences. But it was the ninth-grade school field trip to Fairmount Park that clinched the deal. She was impressed by the park and immediately set her sights on becoming a park ranger or conservationist.

After high school, Donna went to the University of New Hampshire where she studied soil science. Donna said that she spent a great deal of time outside the classroom, backpacking and kayaking in beautiful New Hampshire. She returned to New Jersey when she was given the opportunity to enroll in a co-op educational program. Donna worked for the USDA Soil Conservation Service in various locations in New Jersey and New Hampshire while she finished her Bachelor of Science in Soil Science at Rutgers Cook College. Donna also received a Masters in City and Regional Planning from Rutgers University.

**Maple Shade "Shader" girl:** Donna Drewes grew up in Maple Shade, which is located in Burlington County and known as a town with a strong sense of community. Her parents were high school sweethearts who met at Merchantville High School. Donna said, "My parents were very involved in the community and made sure to give back by volunteering." Donna describes her father William as hardworking; he owned the local gas station where Donna worked replacing stock and cleaning bathrooms when she was a teen. Donna speaks highly of her mother, Betty Janet, who went to college at age 39 and had an impressive career at the Maple Shade School District as both a Board of Education member and later as a teacher. She retired as principal from Steinhauer School. Betty Janet was also a member of the New Jersey Board of Education for Special Education, the Burlington County Special Services School Board and a lifetime member of the Maple Shade PTA.

Donna said, "My mother taught me, through her actions, to never complain and to make the most of the cards you are dealt. She was a fiery, strong woman who accomplished so many amazing things." Donna's mother was instrumental in the creation of Burlington County Special Services school district to better support the special needs community.

**Beer, beach and baseball:** Donna loves craft beer and baseball-the Phillies and the Yankees. She takes an annual 'Beer, Beach and Baseball' vacation with her husband Tom. They travel to Florida every year for baseball's Spring Training. This year, for the first time, Donna will not have to check her email after she gets back from her morning beach walk and before she goes to the afternoon games.

**What you may not know about Donna:** Donna met her husband Tom when their jobs brought them together to collect plant material for a stream restoration project when they both worked for the Natural Resources Conservation Service. But Donna credits her mother with the match because she gave Donna a very large turkey as a gift. Donna decided to invite Tom over to dinner since she could not eat it by herself. Thirty-five years later, Donna and Tom are still enjoying turkey together and have raised two amazing daughters in their home in Flemington.

Donna's daughter Andrea and her husband Eric have a son named Tanner (8 months old). Donna's second daughter Kate and her husband Mike have two girls named Amelia (3 years old) and Nora (9 months old). Kate has a degree in industrial engineering from Lehigh University. Andrea is working on her Ph.D. while doing research on Climate Change through a National Science Foundation Grant. Donna said she is proud of both her daughters' accomplishments, but is even more proud that they are good, nice people.

**What we will miss most:** Donna often greets staff in the morning saying, "Good morning, Sunshine." And we will miss hearing her say many times a day, "The reality is . . ." Donna can handle everything from the detailed minutia to the big picture long term strategy. She is a skilled listener and has a knack for making collaborations work. She is great with the program participants and no matter what question is asked, Donna has a good answer. She's got a mind like a vault! When asked about her success, Donna said, "I get to work with amazing, committed people every day. My success comes from our team that works long and crazy hours for a mission in which we believe. Sustainable Jersey is a mission driven organization working within a change agent model. It is also helpful to remember to be patient with the movement. Change is incremental. If you create a steady base and put in the hard work, you will meet with success."

