



## August 2014 Sustainability Hero Matthew Polsky, Sustainability Change-Agent

“What if I’m wrong?” read the t-shirt of a participant at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa. Faced with an alarming deterioration in the earth’s ecosystems, Matt Polsky joined global leaders at this U.N. Summit in 2002 to discuss solutions, but a major take away was the deeper meaning of that simple t-shirt sentiment.

Matt has worked for over 30 years in state and municipal government, academia, business, and environmental groups; he has many impressive accomplishments. But his approach to sustainability is humble. “We don’t have all the answers yet, no one has perfect information, least of all me. The big ideas are still out there and we must break down our unconscious barriers and biases in order to be ready for the challenges ahead,” said Matt. Living in this space is uncomfortable for most people, but Matt makes it his home.

Matt is a senior fellow for sustainability innovation and multidisciplinary thought at the [Institute of Sustainable Enterprise at Fairleigh Dickinson University-College at Florham](#). He worked for more than seven years as the director of the Land Trust for the Passaic River Coalition in Morristown, buying and preserving 690 acres of land. Matt was the Sustainability Team Leader at the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP), where he co-catalyzed their original global warming work, led an interagency sustainability work group and managed their internal sustainability seminar series. He has just finished teaching his tenth sustainability course, this time: “Introduction to Sustainability Science,” at Montclair State University.



Born in the Bronx, Matt moved to New Jersey at age 11. He’s lived in the Garden State for most of his life, spending time in Bergen, Middlesex, Essex, Union and now Warren County (White Twp.). Matt was first inspired by his eighth grade science teacher at Thomas Jefferson Junior High School in Fair Lawn, who showed the class the soon-to-be-famous first picture of the Earth taken by the Apollo astronauts, lamented the deterioration of the planet, and said there are no guarantees it will always be there to support us. Matt felt the pull to do what he could to set things right and has never looked back.

As an unflagging advocate for sustainability, Matt has been active in the Sustainable Jersey program from its beginning, showing up to mentor towns, speaking on the program’s behalf, and setting up the first successful municipal green business recognition program with the Cranford Green Team. He’s participated in countless task force and stakeholder meetings, and is a tireless writer of comments on New York Times pieces, and articles usually for [Sustainable Brands](#) or [EarthPeople Speak](#).

### **Helping Economists Communicate with Ecologists**

Matt has a BA in Psychology from Rutgers College, an MBA in Economics and an MA in Humanities and Social Thought from New York University. He realized that his strengths were not the traditional entry points for environmental work. He’s not a scientist or an engineer. Matt is a connector with a knack for communicating between different disciplines—helping the economists communicate with the ecologists, and vice versa. He saw huge gaps between fields in how they see the environment and what to do about pollution, and sensed the possibilities. His broad experience enables him to pass on an insight from a lesser known field, mention a potential sustainability partner with whom someone attempting a difficult sustainability project might connect; or anticipate the obstacles they are likely to run into and how they might deal with them. “In this niche, I can leverage both my and their efforts to affect a quicker, broader and deeper green economy than anything one person could ever do on his own,” said Matt. This has been an asset to Sustainability Jersey green teams and staff, and those in the sustainability field who are open to an out-of-the-box idea.

While he was living in Cranford, New Jersey, he spoke at a Town Council meeting hoping to get the town more involved in environmental initiatives. The Council called his bluff and appointed Matt to the Environmental Commission. When Sustainable Jersey was launched, Matt co-chaired the Cranford Green Team and helped them achieve enough points for Sustainable Jersey certification in 2010. Matt said he was amazed how people came out of the woodwork to support the green team and the certification application. Teachers stepped in to add school-based actions and community members became excited about doing a community garden, something Matt hadn't thought anyone cared about. After Matt moved away from Cranford, new blood came in to start up new initiatives and the township was re-certified in 2013.

### **Enlisting Businesses to Achieve New Jersey's Global Warming Response Act Goals**

One of Matt's earliest goals, preceding the sustainable business field, was to better involve the business community in the sustainability movement. He's currently helping a business trade association, the [American Sustainable Business Council](#), which works on policy issues, get established in New Jersey. On July 10, Matt testified before the NJ Senate Energy and Environment Committee on how to achieve the Global Warming Response Act's (GWRA's) goal to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 80% by 2050.

He thinks that we can do much more to enlist businesses in New Jersey as allies in achieving the ambitious GWRA goal, not merely through policies such as New Jersey re-enlisting in the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI), but also by encouraging very large voluntary reductions in businesses' carbon emissions, as some are beginning to do. He is pleased that a section he submitted on sustainable business to a report by a working group chartered by Senator Bob Smith, the Chair of this Committee, was accepted by its diverse participants. He would like companies and state government to come to better appreciate the business sector's economic dependence on healthy ecosystems, and their potential roles in effecting positive changes, beyond what most currently think is possible.



### **No Islands in Sustainability Work**

When asked about his recommendations for green teams working on the local level, he said, "People are capable of great things. All ideas should be put on the table and discussed. See what resonates and then move forward. I have found that people, perhaps unconsciously, set limits and get stuck in categories. We need to question our own and other people's assumptions." He stresses that there are no islands in sustainability work. We are all interdependent and will ultimately fail if we don't work together." Matt said, "We tend to see certainties in life, as opposed to probabilities; we categorize things as black and white, instead of with nuance; quickly define who the heroes and villains are in a given situation, instead of seeing "the other" as coming from a different place, adding an important perspective, or contributing a piece of the truth to the whole; or assume that no better solutions are possible, or ways exist to find them, than what we're doing today."

Matt spends most of his time in a relentless pursuit of learning about sustainability. He's been married for 35 years to Sandy, and has two sons, Josh, age 31, and Noah, age 26, all of whom he is very proud. Matt noted that Josh is prepping to interview for an environmental job, Noah just started at one and Sandy tolerates and sometimes participates in her husband's sustainability interests. If he has free time, Matt weeds and picks crops at [Asbury Village Farm](#), which practices Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), in exchange for a generous share of the week's vegetables. He admitted that a lot of tasting, and good conversations, go on during this work.

### **Identify and Defeat Stereotypes**

Matt even is a reporter for a local radio show, WRNJ. Although his beat is not focused on sustainability issues, he manages to slip in the occasional environmental story, like one on Washington Borough's revitalized Green Team. He said that his radio interviews in a conservative area have confirmed his belief in the educational benefit one gets from looking at issues from many sides. He said that it's fun to identify and then overcome stereotypes and incorrect perceptions, including his own. For example, he recently did a story on an apparent motorcycle gang that surprised and inspired him with their passionate work to get a local government to rename its streets after prisoners of war.

Matt is encouraged by Sustainable Jersey's work to develop a gold level of certification. He said, "The willingness of Sustainable Jersey to go into the unknown and try to figure out what gold-level certification would mean in practice is important. Determining what a truly sustainable municipality would look like will be very difficult. We're unlikely to get it fully right the first time, but it is a necessary stretch if we truly take sustainability seriously."