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## sustainable consumption

### Profiles in Sustainability: Jeri Metz

*Jeri Metz is a Sierra Club member living in Maryland*

It was an early spring morning in 1986 and I was out walking the baby around our block when the yellow VW drove by with a goat casually looking out the window of the passenger seat. As we live just outside Washington, D.C. - twenty minutes from the White House when there is no traffic - this was not a normal occurrence. The VW was traveling slowly enough for me to notice that the man driving had his arm around the goat, as if they were dating, acting like this was the most natural thing he might be doing. The goat was so placid, so poised, just sitting there, that, for a few seconds, I accepted this Alice In Wonderland image as completely logical.



I was thirty-eight years old, staying at home with my third baby. My first two children arrived in my twenties. In my young, energetic days, I had juggled teaching part time while sharing the childcare with my husband. Now with our third child, Tanya, I had taken off from work to be a full time mom and just revel in the grace of being older and experienced with an easy baby. I had done the park bench mom thing in New York City and then Washington; the baby sitting exchanges with friends, the toddler playgroups, the school meetings, the carpools, the birthday parties, sleepovers, and museum trips for fourteen years. With this baby I wanted something different. We had just moved to a small village community outside a major metropolitan area. I was now the half-owner of twenty thousand square feet of tall weeds - complete with blacksnakes, ticks, and poison ivy - and a small, falling down house in need of constant buttressing (literally) and repair.

There was a tiny swimming pool out back, abandoned long before we moved in and surrounded by brambles. Its current incarnation was a sustainable ecosystem for various aquatic plants and amphibians. I was overwhelmed with the unending housework that an old house demands, overwhelmed with the huge overgrown yard. I disliked the symmetry of the abandoned gardens of azalea and rose bushes. But I particularly despised the illogic of having a vast expanse of grasses, a veritable savannah, that needed constant attention to grow in order to be cut down. No one would mow it after both Phil and Aaron had gotten poison ivy in an ill-fated attempt to remove a few feet of top growth. I took Tanya on long walks away from the house, desperate for something new and wonderful and simple to plunge into with this baby.

When the VW turned right at the corner, I knew it had to be a local. I started to run after the car. Tanya fell over in her wagon and began to scream. Undeterred, I scooped her up, abandoning the wagon, and began running with her under my arm. I was saved from a coronary when the car pulled into a driveway just four blocks from my house. I came raging after it, and I arrived at the VW's destination out of breath, sweating profusely, with an hysterical baby slung over my chest. The goat's owners, the man driving and a woman standing on the front steps, were visibly cautious about this maniac woman descending on them, about to accost them at their own front door, perhaps beat them with a shrieking

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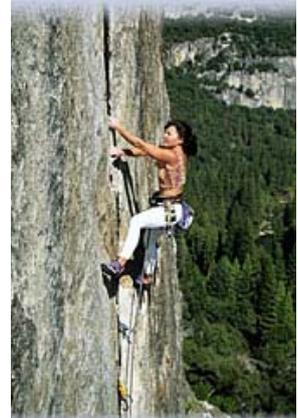
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child. I breathlessly explained that I was intrigued that someone could raise a goat in Cabin John and just wanted to know more.

The woman introduced herself as Nancy and explained that the goat was Named for her sister Martha and was her legal pet. Her partner, Joel, was fixing the engine of her old VW bug and, while giving it a test drive around the neighborhood, had taken Martha for her regular morning constitutional along the C & O canal. To my surprise and ultimate delight, Nancy explained that many of Cabin John's properties came under agricultural zoning laws, which allowed residents to keep small livestock and poultry. There were still a few covert, small-scale suburban farming neighbors caring for goats, pigs, rabbits, chickens, ducks, and guinea hens out behind their ranch homes. And, in fact, as I glanced around the yard, I realized I was in the middle of a miniature farm. To my delight, there was not a blade of grass anywhere. What grass Martha the goat had not eaten, the chickens had scratched up.

And, indeed, the chickens were scratching and pecking between hoed rows laid out for vegetable seeding. Tall bamboo poles were set out for the tomatoes and pole beans that would be planted in a few months. Roosters perched on makeshift fences engaged in a continual crowing contest. There were a great many rabbit hutches over behind the chicken coops off the kitchen. The entire yard was in perpetual motion. The feeling was one of organized chaos, but of a rich and exciting sort.

THIS was what I was looking for... such a nourishing and novel way to live, something so extraordinarily different than anything I knew. This was something I could do with the baby, perhaps even make a little money. This was something to do with an impossible yard with too much grass. Without a shred of knowledge, I was absolutely ready to begin anew, to completely change my life, to become an urban farmer. I couldn't wait to get some chicks and goats of my own to start on the grass in my back yard...

**POSTSCRIPT:** I didn't implement all the ideas that were sparked all at once. It took several years to slowly realize my urban farm. Nancy gave my son six baby chicks a month after I met her. (She continues to be my friend and teacher, inspiring me with her new ideas.) Aaron raised the chicks in the bathtub until they began flying about and the bathroom floor began to resemble a guano heap. The birds were finally banished from the house at two months old. Phil built them a chicken coop resembling a small high-end hotel. When they began scratching up the grass in the backyard, feeding themselves on the infinite supply of bugs and worms, I felt I was beginning. But it was not until they laid their first eggs, sometime in early September, that my farm was born.

I am not suggesting everyone scrap their job or acquire a few hens, though it is very satisfying. I am suggesting that after pulling within for a long, cold and hard three months, we all can consider using the spring as the time of the year to expand our horizons, slowly letting go of some of our self imposed lists of obligations. We often deny ourselves, until it is too late, what we deeply want and need to do.

Without intention, I had used spring for all its folkloric and natural potential. I gave myself over to a moment of whimsy and yielded to the possibility of change, albeit slowly and thoughtfully. My new life was completely unanticipated but continues to be deeply satisfying. For me, it was, literally, just around my corner, four blocks away, that an idea for a brand new beginning waited.

Read more about how Jeri and her family are living simply and mindfully just 20 minutes outside of Washington, DC:  
<http://www.pomegranateseeds.net/>