

The Sun Also Rises

Three Decades later, Jon Costanza returns to his place in the sun by SAMANTHA DRAKE

THESE DAYS, WHEN JON COSTANZA talks to groups about the benefits of solar power, he starts off with his ponytail tucked up out of sight. His audiences, consisting of many people dressed in business suits, often look far more conservative than those he addressed decades ago. Back then, audiences looked a lot more like him, Costanza likes to point out as he lets his ponytail down.

It's a point of pride for Costanza, 52, that he has weathered what he calls solar power's "rollercoaster" ride over the past 30 years. Along the way, he has fine-tuned his alternative energy expertise while building and diversifying his company, Sunpower Builders in Collegeville, PA. But whether solar energy was in vogue or not, Costanza's belief in its power and potential has never wavered.

Costanza launched his business at 18 after helping build a solar home in Haverford. "I was never a kid who was very good at studying from books," he recalls. "I started out with a truck, a saw and a hammer."

Costanza's business took off in the '70s, during the first wave of environmental awareness. Philadelphia quickly became a vibrant solar community. On a national level, President Jimmy Carter installed solar panels at the White House.

Fortunately, Sunpower Builders also focused on construction and historic preservation projects. These businesses grew in the '80s as the demand for solar power declined. The solar panels at the White House were removed during the Reagan administration as the energy crisis abated and priorities turned elsewhere.

Solar power seems to have reached a turning point in the dawn of the 21st century with new state and federal funding. Pennsylvania has demonstrated its commitment to solar power for the long haul. A new measure passed last summer pours \$100 million into loans, grants and rebates for the purchase and installation costs of solar projects for homeowners and small businesses, and another \$80 million for large businesses. And the White House solar panels are back, quietly returned to the grounds by the Bush administration in 2002.

"We're getting somewhere close to parity [in government funding] to what fossil fuels get," Costanza says. People are finally realizing the need to change how we consume resources, and that we must take advantage of opportunities to save money. "It's the beginning of a massive change in our culture," he predicts.

Today, Sunpower Builders designs and installs solar photovoltaic (PV) systems to generate electricity, solar thermal systems to provide hot water and radiant space heating. The company specializes in blending traditional architecture and construction techniques, energy efficiency and good old common sense.

Last September, PennFuture named Costanza its "Green Power Pioneer" for his efforts to promote the solar power in-



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dustry in the region and participation in the Great Green Jobs Campaign. In addition to sharing its knowledge in the Philadelphia region, Sunpower Builders also provides training and expertise to a project called Sunpower Afrique to bring solar energy to parts of West Africa.

Naturally, Costanza's mission is also a way of life. For the past three decades, he has lived in a home that is part 300-year-old farmhouse and part solar showcase, including a PV system and a solar thermal heat pump. "We're off-grid," says Costanza, explaining that the house actually makes more electricity than it uses.

PV technology, however is rapidly and constantly changing. The next five years will produce significant advances in the technology, he says. The next 10 years could see developments once only imagined in science fiction magazines.

Costanza adds: "It's really exciting because something I have worked for has finally taken off." ■■