



## UNITED NATIONS ASSOCIATION *of the United States of America*

A PROGRAM OF THE UNITED NATIONS FOUNDATION  
**UNA-USA Westchester Chapter**

### **United Nations Day 2012**

#### ***“Sustainable Energy for All: Solutions for a Prosperous World”***

Community Unitarian Church, 468 Rosedale Avenue, White Plains, NY Sunday October 21, 2012, 4:00 to 6:00 pm

**Sunday, October 21, 2012** - Celebrating the United Nations' 67<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, the UNA-USA Westchester Chapter organized an exciting event, with the theme “Sustainable Energy for All: Solutions for a Prosperous World”. The first part of the theme picked up on the 2012 International Year for Sustainable Energy for All and the second part was the theme for 2012 UN Day for the United Nations Association of the USA. The program drew over 100 people, from local elected leaders to senior officials of the UN and a number of Westchester student award winners with their families and teachers.

As participants arrived at the Unitarian church, they encountered an exhibit of sustainable energy solutions set up by Groundwork Hudson Valley's Science Barge. The Director of the Barge, **Bob Walters**, was on hand to explain the different technologies to guests. Once inside the room, sustainable energy exhibits by five Yorktown High School students captured the essence of the day. Their teacher, Michael Blueglass, had inspired them to conduct experiments on solar energy, geothermal energy, structural bamboo, heat gain and bio-retention in agriculture. These students had already received awards at the national and international level, and their exhibits were impressive. Other local exhibitors included NYSERDA, Green Mountain Energy, the New York Power Authority, the Public-Private Alliance Foundation, the Energy Project of the UNA Southern NY State Division and Transition Westchester. As people came in, they were entertained by the solar powered rock band, **Solar Punch**.

The program was opened by **Marcia Brewster**, President of UNA-USA, Westchester chapter. She welcomed all the participants and thanked the exhibitors, members of the Board and the officials who were attending the meeting. She gave some background on the UNA-USA and urged local citizens to contact their local congressional representatives and express support for the work of United Nations. While 68% of Americans believe that the UN is still relevant and needed today, despite this broad support, legislation in Congress proposes to cut funding by 50%. She then welcomed keynote speaker, **Nikhil Seth**, the Director of the Division for Sustainable Development, UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA).

Mr. Seth discussed the results of the recent UN Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro (Rio + 20), for which he headed the secretariat. This was the largest UN conference ever held, with over 50,000 people representing a large number of civil society groups. He noted that we are heading towards a storm of economic, social, and environmental crises, and that: “It is only a mobilization of people that will change things.”

He then described how important modern forms of energy are for economic and social life, and that these are available only for people who are connected to the grid. Over 1.4 billion people, however, mainly in developing countries, do not have access to modern energy sources and are not connected to the grid. A large proportion of these people are desperate, illustrating the link between energy and poverty. He suggested that energy access is the key to eradicating poverty. Energy is a key factor in all the dimensions of sustainable development -- social, economic, and environmental. He noted the exponential increase in demand for energy, especially in countries with large populations.

Climate change will have a profound effect on the nexus between water, energy and food. Until we can confront the connections between water, energy and food together, our problems will remain unresolved.

Finally, he explained the Secretary-General’s initiative on Sustainable Energy for All. This includes three main elements: 1. Universal access; 2. Energy efficiency; and 3. Renewable Energy. Currently 50 developing countries are now working with the initiative; more than US\$ 50 billion were mobilized in commitments at Rio + 20. Mr. Seth invited the audience to consider how they could transmit these messages so that individuals will grow up to be true global citizens. He urged people not to demand change from others, but to contribute to a prosperous world. In quoting Mahatma Gandhi, he urged: “Be the change that you want to see in the World!”

The second speaker was **Elizabeth Silleck**, Regional Coordinator of the Energy Smart Communities Program, New York State Energy Research and Development Authority (NYSERDA). She stated that in New York, the energy issue is not access, but excess. She mentioned a number of actions that we can all take to reduce our consumption of energy in whatever we do. NYSERDA’s program is designed to help NY reduce greenhouse gas emissions to 80% below 1990 levels by 2050. The program aims to support investment in energy efficiency which yields high returns—getting the most of what we are already generating or using less fuel to obtain the same result. Ms. Silleck described the elements of NYSERDA’s programs, including incentives for high-efficiency lighting, subsidized energy audits, and incentives for using renewable sources of energy, such as solar.

The Question and Answer session was moderated by **Narinder Kakar**, member of the UNA Board and representative of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature at the United Nations. Questions were directed to both speakers.

*1. Energy has turned into a political football, interest groups are obsessed with keeping the status quo, and a lot of people are being convinced by people who don’t know*

*what they are talking about that there is no point to solar and wind and other renewables. Does this problem exist outside of the US?*

2. *What do we do about making people aware that hydrofracking is not clean energy?*
3. *Question for Mr. Seth: We need a sense of urgency, how do we get our society to treat this topic with a sense of urgency?*
4. *Question for Ms. Silleck: do you recommend any energy efficiency measure that can be done for schools?*

**Elizabeth Silleck:**

- *To question 2:* Natural gas is considered a “clean energy” because it results in fewer greenhouse gases than other fossil fuels. While NYSERDA is neutral on the issue of hydrofracking, the method of natural gas extraction is controversial because of evidence that it has the potential to severely threaten water supplies. She noted that there are a number of existing activist groups that interested people can join.
- *To question 4:* For schools, NYSERDA has vertical outreach: A contractor with knowledge of operational issues that are specific to schools will soon be available for school energy audits. In a school, the first points of activity to look at are lighting, heating and air conditioning.

**Nikhil Seth:**

- *To question 1:* The response to renewable sources of energy and climate change depends on a country’s or region’s own energy security. For example, in Europe, renewable energy has entered into the national and political mainstream of most countries. For most of Europe energy is part of the political discourse – especially in Germany, France and most of the Nordic countries. In developing countries, the economics of energy is extremely important. Brazil is doing much better than most other countries in terms of clean energy, especially ethanol using sugar cane waste. The most important factor is the way the citizenry responds to perceptions of the issue, once energy becomes a part of national politics.
- *To question 3:* The only way to make the world/international community sit up and take notice is to have a people’s movement which forces change.

**Narinder Kakar’s Comments:**

- Definition of Sustainable development: development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.
- Excess (in words of Gandhi) – “The world has enough for every man’s needs, but not for every man’s greed.”
- We must conserve the natural resources that nature has given to us and not waste them.

**Sustainability Awards to Students**

Sustainability awards were given to nine Westchester students by UNA-USA Westchester and the UN Division for Sustainable Development. The students also received awards from the State Assembly (**Tom Abinanti** and **Steven Katz**), the County

Board of Legislators (**MaryJane Shimsky**), Councilman **Vishnu Patel** of the Town of Yorktown and **Paul Feiner**, Supervisor of the Town of Greenburgh.

Recipients of the Sustainability Awards were:

*Yorktown High School*

**Elizabeth Crumley** for her research on structural characteristics of bamboo

**David (Linus) Hamann** for his research in forecasting and managing solar energy

**George-Timothy Khandji** for his research on the use of bio-retention systems in agriculture

**Devon Rosh** for his research on internal heat gain through insulated glass

**Tanvi Tiwari** for her research on optimizing geothermal well locations

*Edgemont High School*

**Sensen Chen** for his contributions to sustainable urban farming

*Hastings High School*

**Berenice Tompkins** for her leadership in bringing sustainable solutions to school and community

*Yonkers High School*

**Sheikh Uddin** for his contribution to hydroponics and sustainable urban farming

*Pace University/Croton-Harmon High School*

**Taylor Vogt** for his leadership in bringing sustainable solutions to school and community

A lovely reception followed the program with networking, refreshments and music by Solar Punch. The event was a great success, and the feedback from participants was very positive.